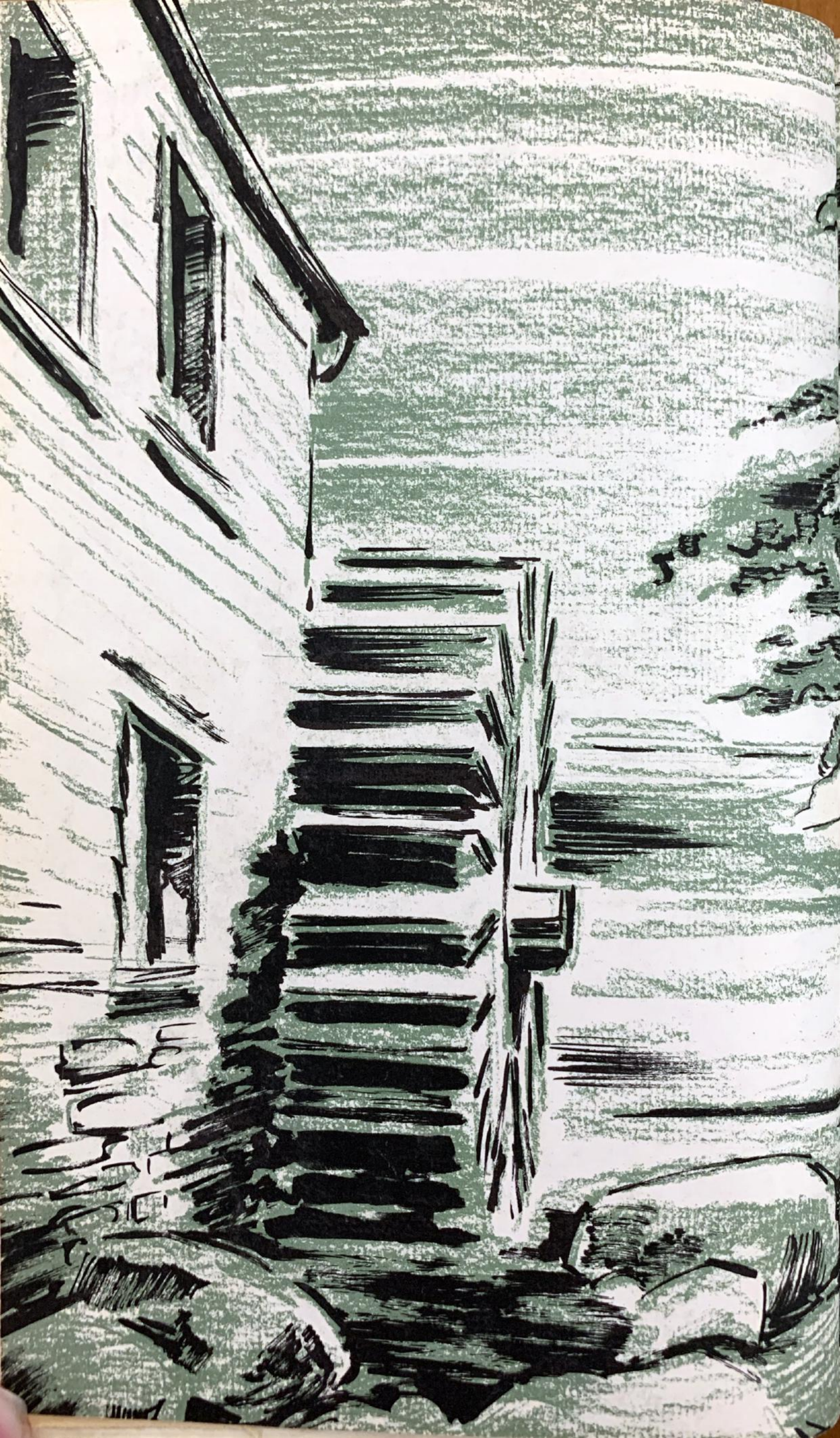

The Mystery of Burnt Hill

ALSO BY KEITH ROBERTSON

THE MISSING BROTHER

THE DOG NEXT DOOR

The Mystery of Burnt Hill

BY KEITH ROBERTSON

X

DRAWINGS BY RAFAELLO BUSONI

NEW YORK · 1952

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To

Mr. Richard S. Wormwer,

an antiquarian bookseller

but not the model for

Mr. McVaugh

6 8 4. 2

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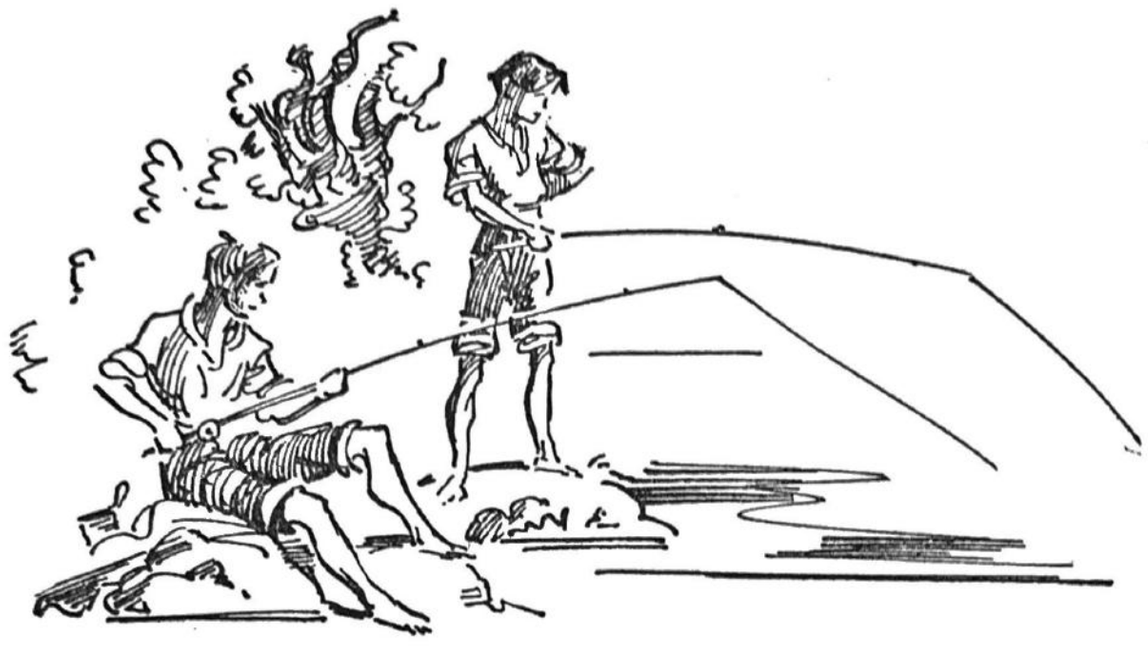
The Mystery of Burnt Hill



1. Secret Ink

The school year ended at noon on Friday. I managed to pass, although I didn't have much to spare in American history. Swede Larson and I had planned to take a long hike through the woods that afternoon. We wanted to celebrate having been promoted to the sophomore class in high school and to get off to a flying start on the summer ahead of us. Naturally it rained, and, on top of that, some aunt and uncle came to visit the Larsons. Swede had to stay home and be polite. That left me at loose ends, so I fooled around in our clubroom above the old carriage house for

most of the afternoon, working on a secret door that would let us out onto the roof of the little lean-to. Then I spent an hour or two cleaning out the pigeon loft and making a few repairs. Just before five I went in the house and washed, and at five sharp I turned on the television set and lay down on my stomach to watch.

Eileen and I used to fight so much about which program we would see that finally Dad made out a schedule that was law. From five to five-thirty was mine, and from five-thirty to six was Eileen's time.

Most of the time I turned on a program that Eileen liked to watch too, but that night I knew there was a broadcast from the Hunter's and Camper's Show, so naturally I switched the set to it. A man was demonstrating a fly rod and showing how to make casts.

"Who wants to see that?" Eileen asked.

"I do," I said. "And it just happens to be my choice."

"That isn't fair," said Eileen. "You're going to watch my program, but I don't want to see this."

"That's tough," I said. "That's the way life is at times. Now just don't bother me. I want to pick up some pointers on casting."

Dad was sitting in his big chair, reading the newspaper. He rustled his paper, and Eileen knew what that meant. When he'd made the division of time he'd warned us that he didn't want any more arguments. She went over to the

corner and started reading a magazine, but I knew she was peeved.

The whole thirty-minute show was about fishing, and before it was half over I decided that the thing to do was to go on an all-day fishing trip the next day. As soon as the program ended I went out in the hall and called Swede Larson.

"I don't know if I can make it or not," he said. "I'm supposed to cut the lawn and do some other work. I'll see if I can't put the lawn off until Monday."

"Send me a secret message by messenger," I said, meaning Albert, my homing pigeon, which Swede had at his place.

I left the telephone and walked back into the living room. Eileen was just tuning in her program. I suspected that she had been standing near the door listening to my conversation with Swede, but I didn't say anything. Eileen is thirteen, which must be the age at which girls are especially curious, because she was always spying on Swede and me. She was a real tomboy, and lots of times we let her join us. However, a guy doesn't want his kid sister tagging along all the time and in on all his secrets.

Eileen turned on the show from the museum, which she likes. It was about the Indians in Guatemala, and I was more interested than she was. I had forgotten about my pigeon when suddenly I looked up and noticed Eileen

wasn't in the room. I rushed out the door and went upstairs in the carriage house, and there she was with Albert, my pigeon. She had taken a little piece of paper from around Albert's leg and was staring at it. I let her look at both sides of the paper, and then I started laughing at the expression on her face.

"Blank, isn't it?" I asked.

"That's stupid," she said, getting angrier by the minute. "Why send a blank piece of paper?"

"Maybe he didn't have anything to say," I answered, and started laughing again.

"Here, take your old pigeon," she said, throwing the paper on the floor and handing Albert to me. She turned her back on me and marched down the stairs.

I put Albert back in his pen and then went through the door into the part of the loft that we use for our clubroom and business office. Swede and I had formed the Carson Outdoor Club and the Carson Street Detective Agency. Since we kept our fingerprint set and all our other detective equipment in the same room that we used for our club headquarters, we couldn't admit members to our club without their seeing the secrets of our detective agency. So Swede and I were the only members of the club as well as of the detective agency.

I got out an old electric iron that my mother had given me and plugged it into the socket. In a few minutes it was

hot, so I put the piece of paper on a board and held the iron on it for ten seconds or so. The message came out perfectly. "All set on this end. Meet you at nine. Swede."

After turning off the iron, I went back to the house. Eileen was in the living room, pretending to be interested in her program. To tease her, I held the message out so that she could see that there was writing on it and then I put it in my pocket.

"You must not have looked at it right," I said. "It wasn't blank after all."

She just pressed her lips together and glared at the television screen. I had really gotten under her skin that time.

Dad was still buried in his newspaper, so I decided that was a good time to get things settled. "Say, Dad, how about giving me my next week's allowance?" I asked. "I want to go on an all-day fishing trip tomorrow and need some money to buy some hot dogs for my lunch."

"How's the garden?" he asked, without looking up.

"I weeded it last night," I answered.

He reached into his pocket and held out a dollar, still not looking up from his newspaper. "Don't ask for it again on Monday," he warned.

"I won't," I said. "It's all right, isn't it, if I go fishing for the day?"

"Umph," he grunted. I settled down happily to watch the rest of Eileen's program.

About half an hour later, while we were eating dinner, Mother looked up and said, "Well, school is over until this fall, Bill, and now we have two children in high school. It just seems yesterday, doesn't it, that Neil started to kindergarten?"

"Certainly does," Dad said. Then suddenly he looked over at me. He pulled out his glasses, the way he always does when he gets stern, and started tapping the table with them. "I have a little matter to discuss with you, Neil."

"What?"

"I happened to meet Mrs. Hurlburt downtown this afternoon, and I drove her home. She informed me that the only reason you are a sophomore is that she was softhearted. Your grades in American history were terrible. In fact she said you didn't even try."

"That history course is as dry as dust," I complained. "Who cares about when the Smoot-Hawley tariff was passed? Or when Louisiana or some other state was admitted to the Union? All we get is dates, dates, and dates."

"I'll admit that history as taught by Mrs. Hurlburt is probably boring," Dad said. "It was when she taught me thirty years ago. But that still doesn't excuse your performance. I used to hate English grammar, but suppose I had refused to learn anything about it? I wouldn't be able to write a decent business letter today. There are always some teachers or courses you don't like. Nothing's ever perfect."

"Well, I passed, didn't I?" I asked.

"Only because Mrs. Hurlburt has been a friend of the family for years," said Dad. "I told her she should have made your promotion conditional, and she agreed that that was what she should have done."

"She's a good scout," I said. I couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Too good," Dad said. "I told her that if she was too soft-hearted to give you some summer work, I wasn't. You are to pick some subject in American history, investigate it thoroughly, and write ten thousand words on it before the summer is over. She will read it and pass on it."

"Ten thousand words!" I said. That sounded like an awful lot, but actually I was relieved. I had the whole summer to do the work.

Dad must have been reading my mind. "Just so you won't be tempted to put this little task off until the last week, you will devote every Saturday to it until it is finished."

"Saturday!" I said. "Why that's the day when there's always the most happening."

"I know," said Dad. "That's why I picked it. You can start your new schedule tomorrow."

"I thought you said I could go fishing," I objected. "The Carson Outdoor Club has a trip all planned."

"You asked me while I was reading the paper, which is sort of taking advantage of me," Dad said. "Since your club

has this trip planned, I'll let you go. But remember that the rest of your Saturdays are taken."

I breathed a sigh of relief and felt so good that I had another piece of pie.

After dinner I was up in the clubhouse, oiling my reel and seeing that all my fishing equipment was in order, when Eileen came up the stairs. She watched me without saying anything, but I knew from the look in her eye that she had something in mind.

"That piece of paper had a message in secret ink, didn't it?" she asked finally.

"Could be," I said, wiping the excess oil from my reel.

"What is it?" she asked.

"That is one of the secrets of the Carson Street Detective Agency," I replied. "I can't tell professional secrets."

"Why not?"

"Because I can't. They're joint property. Swede's and mine."

"You could tell if you wanted to. Besides, I'd keep it secret."

"I'll bet you would," I said scornfully.

"I think you'll tell," she said. I didn't like the confident way she said it.

"What makes you think so?" I asked cautiously.

"Well, the reason you're going fishing tomorrow instead

of studying history is because you said your club had a fishing trip planned," she said.

"That was the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."

"Uh-huh," she agreed. "But you didn't say anything about just having planned it an hour or so before, yourself. Or that there are only two members to your club. That isn't really a club at all."

"It certainly is," I said.

"All right," Eileen said. "If you don't want to tell me about your secret ink, you don't have to. But don't be surprised if you don't get to go fishing tomorrow."

I thought for a minute. Once Dad gave his word he didn't go back on it. I knew I would want another Saturday off sooner or later, though, and my case wouldn't be helped any if he thought I had pulled a fast one on him this time.

"Okay," I said. "I'll tell you about the ink."

I got the bottle from its hiding place up on one of the rafters, and found a piece of paper and a pen with a clean pen point. "This is water with a little bit of sulphuric acid in it," I explained. "It's a very weak mixture, but don't spill it on your clothes anyhow. You just write your message with this and let it dry. The acid does something to the paper, but you can't see it. When you want to read the message you just hold the paper over something hot like the

toaster or the stove. You could use a candle or even a match, but you might catch the paper on fire. We use an old iron."

I connected the iron and, as soon as it was hot, I turned it upside down and laid the paper on it. She could see the words forming as the different parts of the paper got hot.

"It's just like magic," she said. "Now I want to write one."

She wrote several messages and used the iron to make them visible. She was so tickled at being able to do it that I felt almost glad that I'd told her.

"I won't tell anyone," she promised. "That is, if you and Swede will write me a message once in a while. There's no use having a secret ink if you haven't anyone to write secret messages to."

"We'll write you some," I promised. "Swede and I always tear a little piece off one of the bottom corners of every paper that has a message. That's so we won't think every blank piece of paper we find has secret writing on it."

"Can I have some of this ink for my own—to take to my room?" she asked.

"Sure," I said. "And I'll tell you something else. Lemon juice will work, so will orange juice or any juice that has citric acid in it. We don't use them because sometimes they leave a little yellow stain on white paper. But in a pinch they'll do."

I found an empty bottle and gave her a little ink. She ran

downstairs, as happy as could be. I put my fishing tackle away and followed her into the house. She must have gone to her room to write messages in secret ink, because she wasn't downstairs. I decided that it was a good time to call Swede.

"I'm all set to go tomorrow," I said, when I got him on the telephone. "It was a close squeak, though."

"Why?" he asked.

"I'll give you all the details tomorrow," I said. "Right now I want to warn you that I've been blackmailed into giving away one of our secrets."

"Who blackmailed you?" he asked.

"My sister. I had to tell her about our secret ink."

"Hey, that's one of our agency secrets," objected Swede. "Now we might as well post a message on the bulletin board as write it in secret ink."

"It's not that bad," I told him. "But don't use the ink for anything important. I'll do a little research work tonight and come up with something."

When I went upstairs Eileen was in her room, writing secret messages and then bringing them out by holding the paper against the light bulb of her desk lamp. She wrote me one which I read and answered. Then I went to my room and locked my door. I found the key to my strong box and got out my special book, *500 Magic Tricks*. In the back was a section on secret inks. I read over five or six formulas

and decided on one that was made of water and blue vitriol. The writing was supposed to appear a bright blue when you brushed ammonia over it. I figured that I could probably get the blue vitriol at the drugstore, and Mother had ammonia in the laundry.

2. Burnt Hill

We started out for Stony Creek, intending to fish in that big hole just above the bridge on Line Road. As we got outside the city limits a farmer in a jeep offered us a ride. He said he was going on toward Lincolnville and would cross the Little Peconsa River on his way, so it seemed sensible to ride out to the river with him. About five miles out of town he turned off the main highway onto a side road that wound around at least another five miles before it finally crossed the river. Swede and I got out, neither of us too sure where we were or how we would get back to town. We had met only one car since leaving the highway, and we had visions of hiking five miles before we had a chance to thumb a ride. However, it was still early in the morning, and after one look at the river we forgot all about going back to town.

The river came winding out of the trees and tumbling over ledges of rock to cut under the bridge in a clear, fast-moving stream. The water sparkled in the sun with a clear blue color that made you want to take off your socks and go wading.

"Trout," said Swede happily. "I'll betcha there's trout in it."

"Which way will we go?" I asked. "Up or downstream?"

Neither of us had ever been in that region before. Swede's father doesn't fish, and neither does mine, and all the exploring we'd done had been on our own. This was only the second summer that we'd been allowed to go off for the day by ourselves, and we hadn't been out this far before.

"We'll toss," said Swede. "Heads is upstream." He tossed a dime into the air, and it came down heads.

"Wait a second," I said. "I want to release Albert."

We both had creels, and we had put our lunches in Swede's creel and Albert in mine. I liked to give Albert a workout whenever I could, and it wasn't often that I got a chance to take him any distance before I let him out. Just to make Eileen happy I had written a message in secret ink before leaving home. I wrote the time down on the corner of the paper in ordinary ink, fastened the message to Albert's leg, and tossed Albert into the air. He circled twice, gaining altitude. Then he made up his mind and started off fast in a straight line toward town. In a minute he was a tiny black speck; then he disappeared over the treetops.

"I'll bet he'll be home in fifteen minutes," I said.

"Aw, go on," said Swede. "A car couldn't get there that fast."

"A pigeon can travel more than a mile a minute," I said. "And Albert comes from a line of champions."

"Okay, I'll take your word for it," said Swede with a grin. "Let's not have another pigeon lecture. Now that we've got an empty creel, I'll bet I catch a fish to put in it before Albert gets home."

Two hours later the creel was still empty. We were both tired and hot and disgusted. We hadn't had a single bite; in fact we hadn't found a spot that looked promising. The stream was just as clear and inviting as ever, but it kept tumbling over rocks or racing along. There weren't any pools or quiet spots where a fish would want to rest and wait to be caught.

"Let's go back," said Swede, squinting at the sun. "We're getting farther from town all the time."

I was sitting on a log, resting, and in the distance I could hear falling water. The sound was deeper and steadier than the noise a stream makes when it ripples over a few rocks.

"That sounds like a waterfall," I said. "Let's go on that far."

It took at least another half-hour to push through the underbrush to the waterfall, and Swede grumbled all the way. He swore we would get lost, that we were just wasting our time, and that someone was certain to arrest us for trespassing. When we finally did come to the waterfall, though, he forgot everything.

The falls were only about five feet high and were caused by an old stone dam. Above the dam was a beautiful wide pool of blue water, deep enough so that you couldn't see the bottom. There was a big vine-covered stone building back a few feet from the pool, and a flat area covered with deep grass in front of it. A steep hill, covered with trees, was beyond the building. The other side of the pond was bordered with marsh grass, and behind that were trees again. Everything was quiet and peaceful and hidden. It was a perfect place to fish and swim.

"Boy, what a spot!" I said. "This is just the place we've been looking for."

"Wonder who it belongs to," said Swede. "Maybe someone lives in that building."

"Aw, it's been deserted for years," I said. "Look at the windows. They're all out."

I wanted to go for a swim right away, but Swede insisted that we explore first. We put our rods and knapsacks down on the grass and walked over to the building. There was an old spillway, two-thirds filled with stones and rubbish, leading from the pool over to the building and then back to the stream below the dam. Part of an old water wheel was still in place, so the building must have been a mill of some kind at one time. Small trees and underbrush had grown in front of some of the first-floor windows. The mill couldn't have been used for a long time. Some of the doors

were gone, and others hung crazily from one rusty hinge, but the building itself looked as if it would stand another thousand years. The walls were at least two feet thick and were made of solid stone.

We walked inside and found ourselves in a big gloomy room that occupied a third of the building. It was completely empty. A doorway led into another room, and a stairway went up to the second floor. We poked our heads through the doorway and saw a still larger room. It was empty too except for some old shafting that hung from the huge ceiling beams, and a few rusty pulley wheels.

"That's some sort of old machinery," Swede said. "They must have driven something or other with belts from those overhead pulley wheels."

There were several doors to the outside in this portion of the building, one of which was big enough to drive a truck through. There wasn't much to be seen, though, so we went back to the first room.

"Let's go upstairs," I suggested.

"Those stairs might be rotten," warned Swede.

We needn't have worried about the steps, because they were as solid as rocks. At the top of the stairs was a huge door made of planks at least two inches thick. It creaked when we pushed on it, but swung open. On the inside of the door frame were huge iron brackets for a crossbar.

"It would take a battering ram to knock that door down,"

Swede said. He pointed toward a corner, where a wooden two-by-four stood. "Just slip that bar in place, and no one would be able to get in."

"Maybe someone lived up here," I said. "They could barricade the door and fight off Indians or robbers."

The second floor had seven rooms. Two or three of them must have been used for bedrooms at one time because they had closets. There were no fireplaces, but two rooms had chimneys with round holes for stovepipes. Half of the windows and window frames were rotted away, but the stone walls were so thick that I doubt if much rain or snow ever came inside. The floors seemed in good condition and as solid as the stairs had been.

"Most of the plaster is still good, so the roof must be tight," Swede said, looking up at the ceiling. "Probably a slate roof that will last another hundred years." Swede's father is a carpenter and builder, and Swede knows a lot about roofs and foundations and things like that.

Only one room was unplastered, and it was in the corner farthest from the stairway. To get to it we had to go through what was apparently another bedroom. The door was made of huge planks like the one at the head of the stairs, but instead of a bar it had the largest iron lock I have ever seen. A key at least six inches long hung from a nail on the door frame.

The room was dark and gloomy, since it had no windows.

We just poked our heads inside far enough to see that it was empty. It had no ceiling like the other rooms, and we could see big rough beams running to the eaves. Above these were the rafters and the roof.

"I guess this was the storeroom," Swede said. "And whatever they stored must have been valuable, judging from the lock they put on the door."

He took the big key from the nail and tried it. The lock was stiff but it worked. The door could still be locked. We unlocked it, opened the door again, and hung the key back on the nail.

"Let's go back outside," I said. "This place is getting on my nerves."

We ate our lunch and then fished for a while. Swede caught two trout and a sunfish, and I caught one whopper of a trout. After we felt our lunch had settled down we went in swimming.

We were cautious at first because there are liable to be snags or sharp rocks or sunken logs in a pool in the woods. We didn't find a thing, and after a few minutes we were both diving off the dam. The water was wonderful, and I could have stayed in all afternoon. Swede found something to worry about, though, as he usually does.

"Suppose someone comes along and catches us bare," he said. "This place may not be as well hidden as it looks. It would be just like the Girl Scouts to come trooping along."

I finally gave in and agreed to get dressed. But first I persuaded him to swim across to the other side with me. We dove off the dam and raced for the opposite bank, where the marsh grass grew. We ran into shallow water about twenty feet from the edge, so neither of us really won. We stood up for a minute in the mud to look around and to get our breath before swimming back to our clothes. Suddenly we heard something rustling in the marsh grass nearer the bank. We both turned around, startled. I always feel sort of uneasy when my feet are in slimy mud. I started worrying about snakes, and I guess Swede felt the same way.

"Let's get back," said Swede.

"Okay," I said. Then we heard the rustling again and a funny sort of honk.

"It's a bird of some kind," Swede said. "Maybe a wild duck or goose."

"Then why doesn't it fly away?" I asked. "Besides, ducks or geese don't stay around here all summer. They go way up in Canada."

"I've heard of them wintering around here," Swede said. "Why couldn't they spend the summer here? Maybe there's a nest someplace."

We waded in a few feet closer and heard more rustling. Then we saw a big white bird trying to beat its way through

the marsh grass. It was dragging one wing and couldn't move very fast. A minute later we closed in on it. I made a leap for it and landed in the mud on my face, but I caught the bird. When I finally got my arms around its wings I held it up so we could both look at it.

"Looks like a goose," said Swede. "But it's got a neck like a giraffe. What's that cross between a swan and a goose called—a swoose?"

"I've seen geese at the poultry shows with that funny knob on their heads," I said. "This is somebody's fancy goose."

"Something has been gnawing on his wing," said Swede, examining the bird. "Also he's been bitten on one leg, up above the knee there. Or do geese have knees?"

"I guess so," I said. "I'll bet a fox tried to nab him. He probably was too injured to get home and was hiding here in the weeds."

We walked along the edge of the pool and crossed the stream below the dam. Swede had some extra fishline, which we used to tie the goose's feet. Then we trussed up his wings like my mother does a roast turkey when she gets it ready to put in the oven. When we got through he couldn't do much except honk, which he proceeded to do. After a short dip to wash off the mud, Swede and I got dressed.

"What'll we do with him?" asked Swede.

"Build a fire and roast him," I said with a perfectly straight face.

"We can't do that!" said Swede in alarm.

"Sure we can," I said. "Just wrap him in clay the way it says in the Scout book. The feathers'll all come off when we open the ball of clay."

"I meant that he doesn't belong to us," said Swede. "He's somebody's prize goose, you said so yourself."

"I don't know what to do with him," I admitted. "If we leave him here some animal will finish him off, or he'll die from the mauling he's already had. And we're certainly not going to carry any twelve- or fifteen-pound goose ten miles to town. But where'll we take him? Who does he belong to?"

"I dunno."

"I was just kidding, but now that I think about it my first idea wasn't so bad. If it wasn't so late, I'd say cook him and eat him."

"Let's climb up to the top of that hill," said Swede, getting worried again. "Maybe we can see some farmhouse from there. I'll bet those trees just go back a little ways from the stream. Most of this section must be farm land."

We climbed to the top of the hill, and sure enough, just a little way ahead we could see the edge of the trees. We walked in that direction and in a few minutes we stood

looking out over an overgrown, weed-choked pasture. There were thistles and burdock and cockleburrs all over. There was quite a sprinkling of tall thin cedars too, showing that the field hadn't been plowed for some time. We didn't pay too much attention to the field, though, because we were busy looking at an old house on the opposite side of it.

It was a big house. One part of it was three stories high, the middle was two stories, and finally there was a low rambling wing. The roof, the walls, and everything about it were gray and looked a thousand years old, like gray rocks with moss growing on them. Near the house were two or three old ramshackle buildings. They looked as though they were about to fall down but still they didn't seem half as old as the house, which stood there as solid and permanent as a boulder. Half the window panes were out; boards had been nailed over some of the holes and rags stuffed in others, but still the house looked as though it would last forever.

"Deserted," I said. "And from the looks of it, right after George Washington slept there."

"No, it isn't," said Swede pointing. "At least the chickens haven't deserted the place."

I looked and saw that he was right. A couple of big black chickens—they must have been Jersey Giants—were scratching around near one of the buildings. Then we

heard a goose honk, and the one under Swede's arm answered.

"That's the place," said Swede. "This is where our goose belongs."

We walked across the field, getting our trouser legs covered with cockleburrs as we went. Long before we got to the barnyard the geese were honking and the ducks quacking, and finally a dog barked. As we turned the corner of the house a little woman in a long skirt and a big hat came walking toward us from one of the barns.

"Look at this," said Swede. "Did you ever see such a get-up outside the movies?"

The little woman couldn't have been over five feet tall, and a puff of wind would have blown her away. But it wasn't her size that amazed us. It was the way she was dressed. She wore a long black skirt that came down to her shoe tops, and a frilly sort of a blouse like the one my great-grandmother Myra is wearing in the picture that hangs in the sewing room in our house. When she got nearer I saw that she was wearing high-button shoes. Topping everything was a big round straw hat.

All her clothes looked old, and not just because they were out of style. The black skirt had a funny greenish tint, and although the blouse was clean it was sort of yellow with age. Her clothes reminded me of the old clothes in the big trunk

we have in our attic. You can't put your finger on the reason, but the cloth looks and smells old.

"Why, bless my soul, it's Fancy Dan!" said the little old woman in a tiny high voice. "I was afraid some animal had killed him."

"Some animal almost did," said Swede. "His wing is kinda chewed up, and so's his leg."

"You poor thing," she said, patting the head of the goose. "You must have had a terrible time. Let me take a look."

Swede turned the goose over, and she glanced at the wing and leg. "I'll have to get something to put on that," she said and hurried off toward the house, walking like a little puppet in a show.

"Maybe you better do the doctoring," Swede said. "She's liable to faint away."

She came back in a minute with a pan of water, some soap, and a jar of ointment. I offered to do the first-aid work, and she thanked me very nicely but went ahead as business-like as can be. She untied the goose, washed his wing and leg, and then smeared ointment on the raw spots.

"I think I'd better keep him inside until he's better," she said when she finished. "Let's see, now. I guess the old tack room is the only place."

We followed her out to the barn and into a small room at one end, empty except for an old cream can, a broken-down

old bicycle, and a desk covered with dust an inch thick. We carted these outside, and in a few minutes she had the place fixed up for the goose.

"And now, welcome to Burnt Hill," she said when she had closed the door. "I'm Clara Hankin. I'm very grateful to you for saving my goose."

We introduced ourselves, and she offered us some milk and some cookies. It would have been impolite to refuse, so we each had a couple of glasses of milk and a half-dozen cookies or so. While we were sitting under a big maple, eating, I looked around the grounds. There was a small square of trimmed lawn near the back door, but the rest of the place was going back to the jungle. There were weeds and blackberries growing almost up to the house in some places. Here and there you could see an old rosebush or some lilacs. At one time there must have been a big lawn and a flower garden.

At closer quarters the house looked just as old as it had from the other side of the field, and in much worse condition. The walls were shingled with big thick shingles that were warped and curled and covered with moss in spots. I couldn't see much through the windows, but very little of the house looked as though it were being used.

"That's really an old house," said Swede.

"Yes, part of it goes back to about seventeen hundred,"

said Miss Hankin proudly. "And the rest of it was built about the time of the American Revolution. Those are all hand-hewn shingles."

Swede is always interested in building details, so he went over to examine the shingles. "Some of them are loose," he said when he came back. "You ought to nail them down before a strong wind blows them off."

"Yes, I know I should," said Miss Hankin mildly. "But I never get around to it. Many of them are too high for me to reach, and I hate ladders."

"Don't you have someone who could do it for you?" Swede asked. I could see that he was trying to picture that little photograph-album lady holding a hammer and driving a nail.

"No, I'm by myself," she said, offering us another cooky.

Both of us were surprised and must have shown it because she smiled a little and said, "What's so unusual about that? I've lived here all my life."

"Don't you ever get scared of anything?" I asked.

"Of what?" she asked, raising her eyebrows.

"Burglars, hobos," I said.

"No one would bother burglaring this house," she said with a little tinkling laugh. "And it's much too far from any well-traveled highway for hobos to want to visit."

"How about wild animals?" I asked. Outside of deer, I

knew there wasn't anything much bigger than a fox in our section of New Jersey, but she looked like the kind who would be afraid of a ground hog or even an owl.

"The last wolf around here was killed at least forty years ago," she said, looking off into the distance the way people do when they're remembering something pleasant. "I shot it, and my brother was furious. He'd been trying to get it for months. I still have the rifle I used. In fact I shot a fox with it last week."

Swede and I both choked on the cookies we were eating. We looked at her closely, but she wasn't kidding us.

"Do you hunt much?" I asked, trying to sound as casual as she had.

"I don't really hunt at all any more," she answered. "I do keep the rifle handy, though, to shoot rabbits that eat up my garden and things like foxes that come after the poultry." She pointed up at a little railed-in observation platform on the roof. "I go up there, and I can see for miles. I usually shoot rabbits from there." She patted the black dog beside her. "Timmie here is getting old and is almost deaf, so he isn't much good at chasing rabbits."

I closed my eyes and tried to imagine her walking around that little platform with a big rifle under her arm, now and then taking a pot shot at a rabbit or a wolf. The whole idea was ridiculous, but still I believed her.

"I suppose I ought to put that desk away someplace," she

said, looking down at the barn. When we had cleared the tack room for the goose, Swede and I had simply taken the desk outside and left it near the door.

"Where do you want it?" asked Swede. The desk was a fairly small kneehole desk, but she couldn't possibly have moved it by herself.

"I don't know where to put it unless I take it in the house," she said with a sigh. "Then it would have to go upstairs, and I hate to ask you to do all that work. Would either of you boys like to have it?"

Neither of us was much interested in the desk. We were at least ten miles from town, and to get the desk home we would have needed a station wagon or a truck. Swede said no, and I did the same.

"I guess that was my great-uncle Rufus's desk," she said. "Possibly it was my grandfather's but I believe it was Uncle Rufus's. He was the black sheep of the family."

"Why?" I asked.

"He was a smuggler," she said. "During the Civil War he ran the blockade into the Confederate States. One time during the war he came home, and the people around here learned about it. They came after him, and my grandfather, who was a mild scholarly man, stood off the mob with his rifle. No one had courage enough to try to get into the house, but someone set fire to all the barns and outbuildings. That's why this is called Burnt Hill."

"What happened to your uncle who was the smuggler?" I asked.

"Oh, he went on smuggling, I guess," said Miss Hankin as though she were talking about raising petunias. "Grandfather was very much opposed to the smuggling, of course, but after all Rufus was his brother and was always welcome."

"And after the war ended?" asked Swede, his eyes bulging.

"He took his ship and went out to China," said Miss Hankin. "He did all sorts of things like dive for pearls and trade among the natives in the islands. Now and then he would come back for a visit. He was quite an elderly man when I knew him, but he still seemed the most romantic person in the world. He finally disappeared completely, and no one ever heard of him. I suppose he was lost at sea or was killed by some savage tribe in the South Sea islands. Anyhow, I believe that was his desk."

"Look, Miss Hankin, could we change our minds?" I asked. "I've just thought of someplace to use that desk."

"Certainly you can have it," said Miss Hankin. "I'd suggest you set it inside that open shed so the rain won't ruin it before you get it."

We moved the desk inside the shed and then asked her how to get back to town.

"I'm afraid there is little chance of your getting a ride

until you get to the highway, five miles from here," she said. "Mr. Wilson is coming out to take me to church in the morning, so I won't need my bicycle. Why don't you take it and bring it back when you come after the desk?"

Swede and I stood there goggle-eyed while she wheeled out a bike from the house. It was an old one but it was in good condition. Since it was a woman's bike there was no crossbar, and in order for two to ride it one had to sit on the seat while the other stood and pedaled. Swede said he would pedal first, so I got on the seat and off we went down the road. At the end of the first mile we changed.

"Do you suppose she actually rides this bike ten miles into town?" asked Swede, puffing like a steam engine.

"Nothing she would do would surprise me," I said. "Not even if she turned out to be a smuggler herself."

3. The Desk

One of the carpenters who worked for Mr. Larson drove Swede and me out to Burnt Hill for the desk Monday during the noon hour. We returned the bicycle but we had so little time that we didn't say much more than "Thank you" to Miss Hankin. She said the goose was fine.

We carried the desk up to our clubroom and put it in the corner. It was solid enough but it looked shabby and old.

"What it needs is a coat of paint," Swede said. "Then it would look more like the kind of desk an up-and-coming detective agency ought to have."

"I think I've got just the thing," I said.

I hurried to the house and found my mother in the kitchen. "Can I have the rest of that green paint you were using on the porch furniture?" I asked.

"What for?" she asked.

"Swede and I picked up a desk and we want to paint it."

"You can have it, but remember to clean out the brush with turpentine when you're through," she warned. "The

last time you painted you left your brush full of paint, and when I found it, it was as hard as a rock. I had to throw it away."

I found the paint and a brush and went back up to the clubroom. I was stirring up the paint when I heard my mother coming up the stairs.

"I just remembered something else about the last time you painted," she said. "You ruined a shirt and a good pair of trousers. Before you start, go change to that old sweat shirt and those wornout blue jeans."

I objected, but it didn't do any good. I had to go back to the house again and change my clothes. When I got back Mother was examining the desk carefully.

"Stephen was telling me how you happened to get this desk," she said. Mother insisted on calling Swede by his regular name, though I'd told her some people might not know whom she meant.

"We weren't going to take it until she told us that she thought it belonged to a smuggler one time," I said. "I wish it was a regular business desk."

"I don't think you'd better slap any paint on it," she said. "I'm not an expert on antiques but I think this is a very early piece. It's beautiful wood."

"Look, don't get any ideas," I warned. "This is only half mine. The other half is Swede's." I knew my mother where antiques were concerned. If the desk really was an antique

she would want to have it refinished, and it might end up in the house.

"I'm not trying to steal your desk," she said, knowing exactly what I was thinking. "But I do think we ought to find out more about it before you cover it with green paint. It might be very valuable."

"If it is, we could sell it and buy a regular business desk," Swede said. "How are we going to find out whether it's valuable or not?"

"I'll call Mr. McVaugh," my mother said. "He'll probably come over this evening and look at it."

Mr. McVaugh ran an antique shop and old book store downtown. He was a peculiar old man, not as tall as I was, and with a big mop of coarse gray hair that stuck out in all directions. If he ever combed his hair, it didn't show. He was very shortsighted without glasses, and most of the time he wouldn't use his glasses, even though they were usually perched up on his forehead. He'd put his nose down until it almost touched a book, and move his head back and forth while he read. After half an hour he might remember his glasses. When we were a few years younger, Swede and I and the other boys our age used to make fun of him and call him "Rabbit Hound McVaugh" because he looked as though he were inspecting things with the end of his nose.

My mother claimed that Mr. McVaugh was the most independent merchant in the world. If he didn't like the

looks of a customer he wouldn't wait on him. He wouldn't even listen to what he wanted but would interrupt and say, "Haven't got it! Sorry." One time when I was in the shop with my mother a big woman in a black dress came marching in as though she were leading a parade.

"I'd like a pine corner cupboard," she announced, interrupting my mother, who was talking to Mr. McVaugh.

"Haven't got any," said Mr. McVaugh.

"Why, there's one in the window," she said.

"That's not for sale," said Mr. McVaugh.

"Well, why is it in the window then?" she demanded.

"It's too heavy for me to move," he answered, gruff as could be.

She began poking around, asking about this and that. Mr. McVaugh got more and more annoyed because every time he and my mother would start a sentence, this woman would interrupt. Finally he said, "Madam, this is not a curiosity shop."

"You shouldn't have done that," said my mother after the woman had stalked off in a huff. "Why didn't you wait on her? I'm not in any hurry."

"I didn't like her," said Mr. McVaugh. "By the way, you ought to look at that corner cupboard in the window, Mrs. Lambert. It's a nice one."

Sometimes Mr. McVaugh would close his shop at noon and go up above the store, where he lived, and read the rest

of the day. If customers wanted anything they had to wait until the next day. I always thought that his shop was filled with junk, but my mother said he had the finest antiques in the state. I guess he must have or he wouldn't have been able to run his business the way he did.

He must have been tired of the shop the afternoon my mother called, because he locked the door and came over right away. He climbed up the stairs to the loft, said hello to my mother, and nodded to Swede and me. Then he examined the desk, practically scraping the top of it with his nose. He got down on his knees, grunting and puffing, and looked at the drawers and the feet of the desk. Then he pulled out the drawers and looked at the way they were made. Finally he stood up, pulled his glasses down from his forehead, and stared at the desk from a distance.

"Nice piece," he said. "Mahogany. I'd say it was about seventeen sixty or so."

"As early as that?" asked my mother.

"Those feet look like Goddard's work," he said slowly. "There's not quite as much carving as there usually is on a Goddard piece—still, it could be."

He and my mother talked for a few minutes about the type of joints used in putting the drawers together and about the drawer pulls, while Swede and I stood around waiting for them to get to the point. I figured that by "seventeen sixty" Mr. McVaugh had meant that it was made in

that year, and that Goddard was the man who designed or made it.

"Well, should I paint it or not?" I asked finally.

Mr. McVaugh looked at me as though I was some sort of insect. "Of course you shouldn't paint it," he barked. "Are you insane?"

"The desk was given to the boys," explained my mother. "They were going to paint it and use it up here, but I persuaded them to wait and hear what you said. About how much is the desk worth, Mr. McVaugh?"

"If it were refinished properly, about seven hundred and fifty dollars," he said. "Maybe more."

Swede and I grabbed each other and did an Indian dance, shouting and hollering. Finally Mother signaled to us to quiet down. She and Mr. McVaugh talked a while longer and then both went downstairs. Meanwhile Swede and I started making plans about what we could do with seven hundred and fifty dollars. We got out a sporting-goods catalog and picked out a gun apiece, new fly rods, some camping equipment, and a lot of other things, and we still weren't up to seven hundred and fifty dollars. Right in the middle of everything my mother came back upstairs.

"I hate to interrupt your rosy plans," she said, "but I think we ought to have a serious talk about this desk."

"I do too," I said. "How do we go about selling it?"

"Before we discuss selling it, we ought to investigate

a little," she said. "First, this little lady who gave it to you; do you think she had any idea how much it was worth?"

"She couldn't have," said Swede. "She had it stuck out in the barn, gathering dust."

"She'd have sold it if she'd known how much it was worth," I pointed out. "From the looks of her place, I'd say she could use the money."

"That's just it," said Mother. "She may need money very badly, for all we know. In that case the only decent thing would be to tell her how much the desk is worth and give it back."

There wasn't much either of us could say. We just thought about all the hunting and fishing equipment that we'd picked out, and looked at each other.

"I've still got that single-shot twenty-two with the broken firing pin," said Swede with a big sigh. "Maybe I can get it fixed."

"Suppose we go over and discuss the matter with your mother," my mother said to Swede.

I put the sporting catalogue away, and we all drove over to Swede's house. Mrs. Larson agreed with Mother.

"When Steve described this little lady, she sounded familiar," said Mrs. Larson. "I remembered this afternoon where it was I've seen her. It was at church."

She made a telephone call to the minister and then to a Mrs. Wilson. "Mrs. Wilson has known her for years," she

said after the second call. "I told her we would be over in a few minutes to see her."

Swede and I felt as though we were on a paper chase by this time—you know, one of those games where you have a message that tells you to go look someplace and find a clue. When you get there you find another message, telling you to go someplace else. At least we were busy, though, and not sitting around moping about the seven hundred and fifty dollars that seemed to be slipping through our fingers.

"I've known Miss Hankin for years," said Mrs. Wilson. "She and my mother were lifelong friends. I don't know how many generations of Hankins have lived at Burnt Hill, but quite a few. She's the last except for a nephew who is abroad someplace. I think it's terrible for her to be living alone out there in that huge old barn of a house. I don't know how she stands it. I'd die of fright with the wind whistling through all those broken windows at night and everything so dark."

"Doesn't she have electric lights?" asked Mrs. Larson.

"The electric line passes about half a mile away," said Mrs. Wilson. "She would have to pay to have electricity run to her house, and she can't afford it."

"Then she needs the money the desk would bring?" asked Mother.

"She needs it desperately," said Mrs. Wilson. "But she

might not take it. The farm is quite a large one, and she rents out most of the land that is tillable to a farmer a mile or two away. That pays her taxes and perhaps leaves her a few dollars. The nephew I mentioned sends her some money now and then, but other than that she has no income at all that I know of. Sometimes I wonder if she has enough to eat. I've tried dozens of times to find out if she needs money, and she refuses to discuss the matter. When we go out to see her I usually take her something like a pie or cake, but if I try to take a whole basketful of groceries she gets angry. I can invite her here to dinner without hurting her feelings, and I do that as often as possible. Frank usually drives out and brings her in for church Sunday mornings, and she stays here for dinner afterward. Now and then he isn't able to go for her, but we try to check up on her at least every two weeks—especially in the winter."

"Do you mean that she stays out there by herself all winter?" asked Mother.

"She stays out there all winter," said Mrs. Wilson, "and she has no furnace. She closes off all the house but the kitchen, where she lives and sleeps. She heats that room with a wood-burning kitchen range. The farmer who rents her land goes there with a power saw every fall and cuts enough wood to last her over the winter."

"I've never heard such a tale," said Mrs. Larson. "Why, anything could happen to her."

"Anything could happen, and no one would know it for days," said Mrs. Wilson. "She has no telephone, and there is no house within sight of Burnt Hill. She could drop one of those kerosene lamps of hers and burn the house down without a soul realizing it."

"Would you like to go out with us to see her about the desk?" asked my mother. "She may not have any idea how to go about selling it."

"I'm sure she wouldn't," said Mrs. Wilson. "And what is more she may refuse to have anything to do with the desk or any money you might get for it."

"She surely wouldn't be that foolish," said Mrs. Larson.

"Yes, she would," said Mrs. Wilson. "When I'm out there I don't dare admire anything in the house or she will immediately give it to me. I've tried to buy various things from her, and she gets offended. Since she gave the desk to Neil and Steve, she may refuse to have anything further to do with it. She's the proudest woman I've ever known. Remember, she comes from a very old family that was once very well to do. For generations the Hankins have been acting like lords of the manor, and she's too old to change."

"This presents something of a problem," said my mother.

"If she needs the money so badly we'll have to find a way to give it to her without hurting her pride."

"What about the Antique Fair next month?" asked Mrs. Larson. "Couldn't we work out something in connection with that? If she thought she was helping the church?"

"That's the perfect solution," said Mrs. Wilson.

The Antique Fair was an annual antique show and sale held by Mrs. Larson's church. Different dealers and private individuals displayed all sorts of antiques in the church basement, and ten per cent of the price of everything that was sold went to the church.

The plan that Mrs. Larson and Mrs. Wilson worked out was that some dealer they knew would sell the desk. After taking ten per cent of the money for the church, they would give the rest to Miss Hankin. They would tell her that Swede and I had intended to put the desk in the Antique Fair when we accepted it.

"I never heard of people working so hard to give away seven hundred and fifty dollars," grumbled Swede as we drove back to his house.

"I wonder if we're doing the right thing," I said. "If we tell Miss Hankin that we intended all along to put the desk in the Antique Fair, we'll actually be lying. When you have to scheme and lie to get someone to accept money, something's crazy. You shouldn't force money on people, in my opinion."

They heard us in the front seat, but they just ignored us. They kept on talking excitedly about the desk and the Antique Fair. You would have thought they had rescued the goose and been given the desk as a reward. It's funny how little it bothers people when someone else loses seven hundred and fifty dollars.

4. Clem Auerbach

The next morning Mother tried to call Mr. McVaugh on the telephone but got no answer. That didn't surprise her, as half the time he refuses to answer his telephone. So she asked me to go down and get his advice about the best place to have the desk refinished. I called Swede, and the two of us rode downtown on our bicycles. Mr. McVaugh was in the back of his store, reading, and he didn't act too pleased to see us. He thawed out a trifle when we told him what we had decided to do about the desk.

"I've read about the Hankins of Burnt Hill in some of the old deeds and papers I've had in here," he said. "A very old family. It's a shame that it will end with her."

"We want the best refinisher we can get," I said, hoping to keep him from starting on the subject of old families.

"Then take the desk to Clem Auerbach," he said. "He's a rascal but he's a fine cabinetmaker."

"What do you mean, a rascal?" I asked.

"I mean a crook," he barked. "A knave, a rogue, a blackguard, a scoundrel—in short, a thief."

"You mean he steals things?" asked Swede.

Mr. McVaugh put his book down on the table and glared at both of us. "Don't they teach the English language in school these days?" he asked. "One of you asks what a rascal is, and the other asks if a thief steals things. Certainly I mean he steals; I am not given to slander, so I wouldn't have used the word thief if that wasn't what I meant. He's served two terms in prison to my knowledge. He might not murder you in your sleep, but he'd steal your grandmother's wedding ring from her finger if he could. But he is a fine cabinetmaker. If you want the desk refinished as it should be refinished, take it to him."

"Won't he steal it?" I asked.

"I dare say you're safe enough in that respect," Mr. McVaugh said. "In the first place, he doesn't know too much about the value of antiques. He knows good wood and he knows refinishing, but he doesn't know what is rare and what isn't. Secondly, he can't stick a piece of furniture in his pocket as he could money or jewels. Finally, no antique dealer within a hundred miles would buy anything from Clem Auerbach."

"That desk is worth a lot of money," said Swede doubtfully.

"Not such a tremendous amount, as antiques go," Mr. McVaugh said. "Here is Clem Auerbach's address, and here is the name of another man who is not as good, but he's

reliable. If you take it to Clem, agree on a price beforehand —forty dollars would be fair. Keep your hand on your purse when you pay him. And now, good day! I've work to do."

He handed us a slip of paper with two names and addresses on it and went back to reading his book as though we weren't there. We took the hint and left.

Swede had forty cents, so we stopped at the drugstore for a soda. "Where do you think we ought to take the desk?" asked Swede between spoonfuls of ice cream.

"To Clem Auerbach," I said promptly.

"I'll bet our mothers won't agree," he said in a worried voice.

"We don't need to mention that he's a crook," I pointed out. "We were told to find out who Mr. McVaugh recommended. He recommended Clem Auerbach."

"I still don't see why he couldn't load the desk into a truck and take it someplace like New York, where no one would know him."

"He could, I'll admit that," I agreed. "But we'll put the Carson Street Detective Agency on the job. It'll be our first assignment."

"How could we handle the case?" Swede asked. "We can't camp outside his place for days."

"I have it all figured out," I told him. "The desk isn't worth seven hundred and fifty dollars until it's refinished,

so we won't have to worry until it is. He'd have to use a truck or a station wagon to move it, and he wouldn't dare do that in broad daylight, right here in town. So every night we'll slip over and see how far along he is. As soon as it's finished we'll go get it. Maybe we'll have to stand watch a night or two. If we aren't going to get any money out of the desk we might just as well have some fun."

"All right," agreed Swede. "But I still think it's dangerous."

We got on our bikes and rode over to Center Street. Number 22, which was Clem Auerbach's address, turned out to be a grimy old building that must have been a store or a delicatessen at one time, because it had a big glass window that fronted on the sidewalk. There were dingy houses on both sides and across the street. I had been down Center Street before but I had never noticed how run down that section looked.

Before we stopped at the shop we decided to look over the neighborhood—or case the area, as detectives say. We rode up and down the side streets and then investigated the alley. Most of the houses had back yards filled with trash, tin cans, and an occasional junked car. In back of Auerbach's shop was a big pile of wood scraps, a box full of tin cans and bottles, and an old iron bed leaning against the wall. There was a back entrance to the building and two windows with green blinds that were drawn.

One side of the building was a blank wall, but the other had several windows. That wall was screened from the house next door by a tall hedge.

"If there aren't blinds over those windows, that's the place to spy from," said Swede as we rode down the alley a second time.

The building had a second floor, but only over the front half. Two windows looked out from the rear of the second floor onto the flat roof of the ground floor.

We went back around to the front entrance and got off our bikes.

"I don't feel too safe about leaving these parked around this neighborhood," said Swede. "Do you think one of us ought to stay and watch them?"

"We'll lean them against the window," I said, "and we can see them from inside."

The big show window was so dirty that you could scarcely see what was in it. A second-hand bureau stood in one corner, and next to it was a tea table. Near the front were four little chairs for children. They were new, and I suppose Clem had made them. They were sturdy, good-looking chairs.

The door was locked, so we pressed our faces against the glass and looked inside. A large room took up most of the building. There was a long work-bench along one wall

with several wood vises; all sort of tools hung very neatly in racks above the bench. The work-bench and the tool rack were the only neat part about the room, however, for pieces of furniture stood here and there around the rest of the shop. There were bureaus without any drawers, chairs without any legs, and halves of tables.

"Do you suppose he's repairing all that junk?" I asked.

"He has probably used pieces of that furniture to repair others," Swede said. "Unless he's hiding behind that big bureau, he isn't here. We might as well go."

"Maybe he's in a back room," I said. "This room can't take up the whole building. Let's knock."

We pounded on the door, waited, and then pounded again. As we were about to leave, a man came through a door at the back of the shop. He was in an undershirt and a pair of trousers. One suspender supported his trousers, while the other hung down loose behind. He picked his way through the scattered furniture to the front of the shop. After unlocking the door, he opened it about six inches.

"What do you want?" he asked in a sort of rasping whisper.

"We want to find out about getting a desk refinished," I said.

"What kind of a desk?"

"An old one that's been sitting out in the barn," I said.

"My mother has decided to have it refinished." I didn't want to tell him too much about the desk or how valuable it was.

"Mr. McVaugh told us to come and see you," Swede added.

"Who's going to pay for this refinishing, you kids or your parents?" he asked, opening the door at last.

I didn't like being called a kid, but then I didn't like anything about Clem Auerbach. He was a man of about medium height and weight. His right shoulder was about three inches lower than his left one, which made him look lopsided. At least two days' growth of beard covered his pasty face, and his eyes were bleary, as though he had just got out of bed. He had black hair, which was thin on top, and later when he turned around I saw a big bald spot. I don't know how long it had been since he'd washed his hair, but he hadn't washed that bald spot in a long time. It was grimy.

"My mother will pay for the refinishing," I told him. "How much will it be?"

"Depends on the size and the condition of the desk," he answered. "It might be a big desk or a little one. It might be covered with paint and full of nicks. I'll have to see it."

"It's about this size," said Swede, measuring with his hands. "And there's no paint on it, just varnish that's mostly peeled off."

"Why don't you bring it over?" Clem suggested. "I'll

refinish it and charge you according to the time the job takes."

"We have to have a set price," I said.

"Then I have to see the desk."

"How soon could you do it?" asked Swede.

"Week, ten days, two weeks," he said. "Depends a little on the weather. Shellac won't dry fast enough on damp days and too fast on real dry days. You have to use eight or ten coats and rub each one down to get a good finish."

"Why don't you come over and look at it?" I suggested. "Then if we agree on a price you could bring it back with you."

"My truck is broken down," he said. "I'd have to hire someone to bring it here to the shop. That would be extra."

"Suppose we bring the desk around to let you look at it," said Swede. "We could do that about a quarter to one."

"All right," said Auerbach. "I'll probably be in the back room cooking my lunch, so if you don't see me yell for me."

We went home and made a report, not mentioning anything about Auerbach's shady reputation. Mother agreed to spend up to forty-five dollars for the refinishing. During the noon hour Swede got his father's truck again, and Tim, the carpenter, drove us over to Clem Auerbach's.

After haggling for a few minutes he agreed to refinish the desk for forty-two dollars and fifty cents. Then Swede

and I went back to the clubroom over the carriage shed to make our plans.

"He won't start working on it today," I said. "There isn't much point in checking up on him tonight."

"I think we ought to, anyhow," said Swede. "Suppose we drop by there a little after dark."

I agreed, and after dinner I met Swede at the high school to play some tennis. When it got too dark to play we got on our bicycles and rode over to Number 22 Center Street. We went down the street first and then through the alley, and there wasn't a light in the building anyplace. Swede was worried immediately.

"I wonder if he's loaded the desk into a truck and disappeared," he said.

"His truck is broken," I said. "He's probably out somewhere. If I lived in that place I'd be out every chance I got."

We rode around the block and stopped at a garage to get some air for the rear tire of my bike. The man who was taking care of the gas pumps was the older brother of a boy we knew in school.

"Do you know what kind of a truck Clem Auerbach has?" asked Swede.

"Don't know him," the man answered.

"He repairs and refinishes furniture around the corner on Center Street," Swede told him.

"That fellow!" said the man. "He hasn't got a truck any

more. He still owes us six dollars and fifty cents for repairs, and about three months ago he lost his truck. I guess he didn't make the payments."

Swede felt a little less worried when he learned that Auerbach had no truck, so we both went home. I got back early enough to read the latest installment of a detective story that was running in a magazine.

I worked almost all the following day, washing the car, mowing the lawn, and weeding the garden. After dinner I loafed around the house until dusk and then went over to Swede's house. I gave our secret whistle as I rode by, and by the time I reached the corner he had joined me on his bike. We went over to Center Street, and this time, when we rode by, we saw lights in the shop. We got off our bikes and walked past the front door. Auerbach was working on something at the back of the big front room and sitting on a chair talking to him was a stranger in a dark brown suit. We couldn't stand outside the big front window and stare at them, so we decided to go around in back.

We hid our bikes in the back yard as well as we could and then slipped up between the high hedge and the side of the shop. The first window in the side of the building was dark; evidently it looked into one of the rear rooms. The second window had a blind drawn to within a few inches of the window sill, but beneath that a light was shining. We carefully crept up and looked inside.

Auerbach and his visitor were on the opposite side of the room. The stranger was tilted back in his chair with his back toward us, while Auerbach was standing so that he faced in our direction. He was sanding the top of the desk as he talked. The window was closed, even though it was a fairly warm night, and we could hear nothing but a mumble of voices. Judging from what we could see, they were having a normal conversation. Now and then Auerbach would point to some piece of furniture and, I suppose, tell his friend what he was doing with it.

After a few minutes he took out all the drawers of the desk and turned it on its back. He examined the drawers carefully and looked inside the desk. Then he looked puzzled. He walked over to his work-bench and came back with a folding rule. He opened it and measured the width of the desk, both outside and inside where the drawers had been. Then he measured the depth of the hole where you put your knees. He said something to his visitor and moved the light so he got a better view. He got down on his knees and began rapping on the back panel of the kneehole.

"I wonder what gives," Swede whispered. "What's he doing?"

Before I could answer we saw what he was doing. The back panel of the kneehole opened out like a door. We couldn't see what was behind the door, but a minute later Auerbach stood up with a book in his hands. The book,

which was about twelve inches long and ten inches wide, looked like an old ledger or record book of some kind.

The friend got up from his chair, and the two men examined the book together beside the desk. For the first time we were able to see the stranger's face. It was a thin dark face with a long thin nose. Beneath the nose was a black mustache about the size of a toothbrush. His eyes were so close together that he looked like a fox or a weasel. He was an inch or two taller than Auerbach and looked considerably younger.

"What do you suppose the book is?" whispered Swede.

"I don't know, but I'd like to find out," I said. "It might be valuable."

"What makes you think so?"

"This desk used to belong to a smuggler," I said. "That might be a record of where he hid some of his money."

Swede let out a whistle that was so loud that we both ducked back out of sight. We found a little pocket in the hedge and held a conference.

"Whatever the book is, it doesn't belong to them," I said. "We ought to claim it."

"How can we do that?" asked Swede.

"We might go around in front and just pretend we'd dropped by," I said. "Then we'd ask for the book. Say we'd forgotten to take it out."

"I don't think that would do much good," said Swede.

"If it's valuable they'll claim the secret compartment was empty. If it's not worth anything he'll probably stick it back in the desk anyhow."

"I suppose you're right," I admitted. I didn't like the idea of walking in the shop and asking for the book any more than Swede did. "Let's go back to the window. I don't think they heard anything."

They were still standing by the desk, looking at the book, when we returned. They didn't seem very excited about it but were turning two or three pages at a time, stopping here and there. Finally Auerbach handed the book to the other man and began sanding the front of the desk. Weasel Face sat down on his chair again and kept thumbing through the pages.

"I guess it's nothing very important," said Swede after we had watched for at least five minutes.

"I guess not," I admitted, feeling disappointed.

We had decided to leave when the man reading the book looked up and asked Auerbach a question. Auerbach shrugged his shoulders and said something that was probably "I don't know." The man then pointed to a page in the book and said something that seemed to interest Auerbach very much. He put down his sanding block and went over to look. After talking for a few minutes longer, Auerbach rummaged in a drawer of his desk and pulled out a pencil and a scrap of paper. The man made some notes, not very

long ones, and put the paper in his pocket. He looked through the remaining pages of the book and handed it back to Auerbach. Then they both went into the back room. We saw a faint strip of light appear along the edges of the next window, so we moved back there. The blind was drawn all the way to the bottom, so we could see nothing. We waited around for a few minutes while they kept on mumbling inside. When they showed no signs of going back into the front of the shop we decided to go home.

"They found something that interested them," said Swede. "They weren't too excited, though."

"We've got a real mystery on our hands," I said enthusiastically. "Let's both go home and think about what we're going to do. Then first thing tomorrow morning we'll have a conference at the office."

5. Trapped

Swede appeared at my house before I had finished breakfast the next morning. I gulped down the last of my bacon and eggs, grabbed a cinnamon bun for each of us, and went with him to the clubroom. We locked the door, sat down, put our feet up on the table, and had a serious conference.

"I was awake until after midnight trying to figure out the best method of handling this case," Swede said.

"So was I," I said. "I tried to look at it from every angle and consider every possibility."

"What did you end up with?" asked Swede.

"Nothing."

"Me too," said Swede glumly.

"What you said last night about going and asking for the book is true no matter whether we go there alone, with our parents, or with the police. They can deny there ever was a book, and it's just their word against ours," I said.

"The only way we'll get the book is for them to give it to us of their own free will," said Swede. "Or I suppose we could steal it."

"I've sort of been thinking about that," I said.

"Are you crazy?" asked Swede. "This fellow Auerbach is a professional thief. You don't suppose he'd leave the book around where a couple of beginners like us could break in and steal it."

"He might," I argued. "He doesn't know that we know the book exists. Anyhow, let's keep spying on him. Maybe we'll get a break."

"All right," agreed Swede, "but in detective work you don't spy on anyone, you keep him under surveillance."

We took turns all that day, wandering down Center Street on our bikes about every hour. Except for half an hour or so at lunchtime, Auerbach was busy the entire day in the back of the shop. He was probably working on our desk, although neither of us went close enough actually to tell. We didn't want to arouse any suspicion.

We eat dinner at our house about half an hour later than the Larsons, and as I was finishing my dessert at dinnertime Swede called. He had made another scouting trip, and Auerbach had left the shop just as Swede rode by.

"I followed him downtown, and he went into the Sunny Corner Café," Swede said. "He's there now, eating at the counter. I'm across the street at the newsstand. Come on down. He might meet his friend, and we'd want to trail them both if they separated."

I excused myself and hopped on my bike. In five minutes

or so I joined Swede at the newsstand. We had a soda and a candy bar apiece while we waited for Clem Auerbach to finish his dinner. I wouldn't have been able to recognize him at that distance if Swede hadn't pointed him out to me. He was wearing a pair of dark brown trousers and a sport shirt that looked reasonably clean. Also he must have shaved because his face wasn't half as black as it usually was.

"He's wearing a hat too," said Swede. "He's out to do the town or to see his girl friend."

He was certainly in no hurry. He took at least ten minutes to eat his dessert and dawdled over his coffee. Every time the waitress went by he would stop her and talk for a few minutes. It was dark by the time he paid his check and left.

He wandered down the street for a block or so, looking at the shop windows and wasting time. "I'll bet he's supposed to meet someone," said Swede. "The other fellow is probably late."

I thought the same thing and was saying so when he stopped to look at the billboard in front of the Casino Theater.

A double feature—a Western and a mystery—was playing, and one of them must have appealed to him, because he bought a ticket and went inside.

"He was looking for something to do," said Swede. "Now

wouldn't that beat you? Nothing mysterious about his actions at all."

"Now's our time," I said. "Let's go get that book."

Swede wasn't very enthusiastic about the idea, but he didn't say much. We rode over to Center Street and hid our bikes in the tall hedge near the alley. We were walking toward the rear of the shop when a car came down the alley and turned into the back yard of Auerbach's shop, its headlights shining directly on the back door. The second the headlights started to swing, Swede and I dropped to the ground and tried to flatten ourselves like pancakes. There was nothing between us and the car but a few weeds.

The car door opened, and we held our breath. Then we heard a garage door roll open. Whoever opened the door got back in the car and shifted into reverse. It backed into the garage, and then the headlights went out. Swede and I waited until the garage door closed again and we heard the man walk away.

"I suppose the man has a right to put his car in the garage," Swede said with a big sigh. "But why does he have to do it that way?"

"Makes it easier to get out, I suppose," I said, wiping the perspiration off my forehead.

"It may be easier for him but it's certainly tough on my nerves," Swede said. "I trust that will take care of the excitement for tonight."

"It will," I said confidently. "The rest will be simple."

None of the windows had screens, so it was easy to see if they would open. First we tried those on the side of the building next to the hedge. They were either locked or had not been opened for so many years that dynamite would have been needed to budge them. Next we tried those in the back wall of the building. The last one went up with a protesting squeak.

We listened for a minute, and then Swede gave me a boost. I squirmed over the sill on my stomach and crawled into the room. I listened again and then flashed on my light. It's one of those little pencil lights, but in a black room it can look like a klieg light. I was standing in Auerbach's bedroom. There was a three-quarter bed in one corner with some rumpled blankets on it, a bureau, a big double-doored wardrobe, an old table, and two chairs. Auerbach may have known all about making and refinishing fine furniture but he certainly didn't care what he used for himself. The furniture in that room was even worse than the junk in the front room.

"Psst," said Swede. "Is everything all right?"

I had slipped in under the blind, so I pulled it aside and stuck my head out. "Everything seems clear sailing," I told him. "Give me your hand, and I'll help you in."

"I think one of us ought to stay outside to make sure he doesn't come back and surprise us."

"He won't come back," I said. "That's a double feature."

"Yeah, but maybe he won't like one movie," said Swede. "I've heard of people who got up and walked out at the end of one picture."

"Even then we'd have an hour or so," I said.

"I still think one of us ought to watch," said Swede stubbornly. "And I'm not scared to come in either. If you want I'll hunt for the book and you can stand guard."

What he meant was that he wasn't any more scared than I. I didn't like the idea of prowling around inside in the dark by myself, but I wasn't going to climb out and let him take my place. "I'll hunt," I said. "You better go out in front, though. He comes in that way, doesn't he?"

"He left that way," said Swede. "If I see him coming I'll give one whistle."

"All right," I agreed. "And if I can't find the book back here I'll look out front. I'll try to keep my light from showing, but if someone starts to walk by, you better warn me."

"Two whistles for that," said Swede. "And you better close the window until you're ready to come out. Anybody who saw an open window would be suspicious. Auerbach never uses fresh air."

I closed the window as quietly as I could and then tiptoed over to the door of the room. I flashed on my light and looked around. Evidently there were only two rooms in the back of the shop—the bedroom and this one, which

seemed to be a kitchen and dining room combined. A big round oak table with four chairs was in the middle of the room. In one corner there was a sink, and next to it a kerosene stove. The sink was piled full of dirty dishes, while still more dishes littered the table. An old kitchen cabinet stood next to the stove. In the far corner were two worn-out upholstered easy chairs. That was all. There was no rug, no curtains, nothing to make the room look lived-in except those dirty dishes.

I started in the bedroom and went through the bureau. That didn't take long because there weren't many clothes in it, and all that was needed was a glance at each drawer. Then I looked in the wardrobe. This took a little longer because I had to paw through a big pile of dirty shirts and underwear in the bottom of it to make certain the book wasn't hidden there. I looked under the mattress and in the little drawer of the table but without success; I wasn't more than three minutes in searching the whole room.

The kitchen took longer because the kitchen cabinet was full of packages, paper bags, stale bread, and cans of food. I looked carefully on every shelf and in every drawer. Next I looked in the oven and underneath the cushions of the chairs. I was pretty disappointed when I found nothing, because the thought of searching the front part of the shop was discouraging. There were so many pieces of furniture

and piles of boards that the book could be hidden in a hundred places. I glanced at my watch and saw that I hadn't been inside much more than ten minutes. I could spend at least half an hour hunting through the shop.

I had taken two or three steps inside the shop when a bell seemed to explode in my ear. In a matter of seconds a half-dozen frightening thoughts flashed through my head. I had set off a burglar alarm, and the whole neighborhood would be aroused. The police would arrive in a squad car, and I would be trapped. Or someone was at the front door, ringing the bell. Probably Auerbach's friend had arrived. In my panic I forgot that Swede and I had found no bell when we came to see Auerbach but had to pound on the door. Then the bell paused for a second and rang again. I gave a huge sigh of relief as I realized it was a telephone. I was still so panicky, though, that I automatically began feeling around to find the receiver. If I had been able to find it I might have answered it. Luckily my brain started to work again before I did anything foolish. I stood there for at least three minutes while the telephone continued to ring. Finally it stopped, and I found courage enough to go on into the shop.

I started with the work-bench first. It was one with several banks of drawers that went all the way to the floor. I began at one end and worked forward. I noticed the same peculiarity about Auerbach as I had the first day. He was

sloppy and dirty about everything except his tools. These were in perfect order. There was a slot for each chisel, holes for the different sizes of bits, and a special place for everything.

I had almost finished with the work-bench when suddenly I heard Swede's whistle. I froze immediately and listened hopefully. I could hear my heart beating but nothing else. He had whistled only once.

I had been so certain that Auerbach wouldn't be back for a while that I had made no plans about what I would do. He might be a block away or only a few yards, I had no way of knowing which. For a few seconds I stood there like an idiot. Then I started for the door into the rear room. I had turned off my flashlight at Swede's whistle, so the room was pitch black. The floor was cluttered with odds and ends of furniture, and I was trying to hurry. On the fourth or fifth step I fell. I tried to catch myself by putting out my hands, but my left hand hit a table or something and threw me off balance. I did a half spin, and the back of my head hit the floor with enough force to shake the building.

I wasn't knocked out but I was groggy. I lay there on the floor for a minute and then rolled over onto my stomach. I was up on my hands and knees, shaking my head, when I heard the door open. The next second the entire shop was flooded with light. I looked at the piece of furniture beside me and saw that it was an old-fashioned sofa, the kind that's

about a foot off the floor. I dropped down on my stomach and rolled under the sofa until I hit whatever stood behind it. Then I took a deep breath and prayed.

Clem Auerbach came clomping down the length of the shop. He was still some distance away when I saw my flashlight lying on the floor a few feet from the sofa. I listened to those feet clomping closer and closer, my eyes riveted on the flashlight. Then he passed without coming over to my side of the room. He went on into the kitchen and then the bedroom. As soon as I was sure that he was out of sight I wriggled out and grabbed my flashlight. Then I dived back under the sofa.

Since Auerbach hadn't turned off the lights in the shop, I knew he would be back. I didn't feel too well hidden, so I slithered back until I was lying between two big bureaus with only my head and shoulders sticking under the sofa. Then I put my aching head down on my hands and waited.

When I saw his trouser legs walking across the floor I knew that I was in real trouble. He had changed his brown trousers for the old baggy gray ones that he wore while working. He was going to work for a while, and his workbench was not more than ten feet from where I was hiding.

He sawed, planed, fitted, and hammered away at something for more than half an hour while my neck got stiffer and stiffer and my arms went to sleep. Then I smelled shellac. He was refinishing something—probably our desk.

Finally, when I was so uncomfortable that I was numb, the telephone rang. Auerbach put his tools down and walked to the other side of the room to answer it while I stretched my arms and legs and wiggled my toes thankfully.

"Hello," he said into the telephone. "Flip?"

There was a short pause, and then he said, "I went out for dinner and then to a movie. After I got inside I discovered I'd seen the Western. I wasn't interested in the other, so I came back. I thought you were going to call tomorrow."

This time there was a pause lasting several minutes. Auerbach kept punctuating whatever the other person was saying with "Yeah" and "Is that so?" Finally he said, "I haven't learned a thing. Haven't had a chance to talk to anyone connected with the matter. But I will in a few days. When will you be down this way again?" The answer evidently satisfied him because he said, "I ought to know everything by then. Okay, I'll see you, Flip."

He came over to the work-bench, looked at whatever he had been shellacking, and cursed. "I'll have to sand that down now," he said to himself in a disgusted tone.

I couldn't see what he was doing but I think he was puttering with his tools. He sharpened something on a stone and then he seemed to be sorting nails for a while. Finally I heard him closing drawers. Then he turned off the light and went into the back room. I stretched my arms and legs again, but I didn't crawl out.

He turned out the lights in the back room about eleven o'clock. At first I planned to wait at least half an hour before I moved, but at eleven-fifteen I couldn't stand it any longer and I crawled out, straightened the kinks out of my back, and stood up. I listened very carefully and heard the sound of snoring. It was the most beautiful sound I've ever heard.

I tiptoed along, trying the side windows from the inside, but they showed no more signs of opening than they had when Swede and I had tried them from the outside several hours before. Next I went to the front door, but the lock was the old-fashioned kind that takes a key. I remembered that Auerbach had used a big key that first day, so I looked around for it, even flashing on my light. It was not to be found.

I was standing beside the front door, trying to decide what to do next, when I saw a light flash outside. I flashed back, and then Swede turned his light on a piece of paper which he was holding within a few inches of the door.

"Go upstairs if you can," it said.

The stairs to the second floor were about a third of the way back in the shop, and I had to climb over furniture to get to them. It was an enclosed stairway, and when I finally did reach it I found a bureau standing in front of the door. I slid it out about ten inches, hoping that nothing was piled on top of it or leaning against it. There was only one

medium-sized squeak. Then I tried the door. I felt like kissing it when it opened.

I squeezed through the doorway and flashed on my light. The stairs were cluttered with junk, old drawers, and pieces of wood all the way to the top, but I knew I could clamber up them. I reached my hand back through the door and pulled on the bureau. Naturally I couldn't get it as close to the door as it had been before, but I did pull it back about six inches or so. Then I closed the door, turned on my light, and began climbing the stairs. It was like an obstacle course, but I made it to the top without upsetting a thing or making any noise to speak of. I wish my mother could have seen that performance. She wouldn't dare accuse me of being clumsy again.

The upstairs was divided into a hall and two rooms. I went into the back one and gave a quick flash of my light at the window. A second later I got an answer from the edge of the roof near the rear of the building.

The windows on that second floor hadn't been opened in at least ten years, and they were stubborn. However, I felt I was far enough away from Auerbach so that I could afford to make a noise, and I gave a tremendous heave. The window creaked and cracked, but it opened. The window sill was only three feet above the flat roof, so I just stepped through and closed the window behind me. Then very

slowly and carefully I began walking across the roof toward the flash of light I had seen.

Swede was standing with his chin just above the edge of the roof. When I reached him he put out his hand and felt my leg.

"I just wanted to make sure that you weren't a ghost," he said. "Brother, do I feel relieved!"

He had found in the back yard an old bedspring, which he had stood on end against the building for a ladder. I lay down on my stomach and eased myself over the edge while he guided my feet. As soon as we were down we carried the spring back where he had found it and got on our bikes. We pedaled away from that place as though it were filled with witches and goblins.

When we were five or six blocks away I looked at my watch. It was a few minutes after twelve. "Wow!" I said. "Do you have an idea what time it is?"

"A little after twelve," said Swede. "But don't worry about it. I called your place, and your father said you could spend the night with me."

"Yeah, but what about trooping into your house at twelve-thirty?" I asked.

"I have my tent set up in the side yard," said Swede triumphantly. "I called my mother and told her I'd be with you until late and that I'd go directly to bed in the tent."

"You're a genius," I said. "Since we're this late, it won't make any difference if we're a little later. Let's go get a hamburger. I'm starved."

"You know that was a pretty brilliant piece of teamwork we did there?" I said while I was eating the second hamburger. "That whole outside-inside routine from your warning to the way you let me know how to get out."

"Yeah, things did work out pretty smoothly," said Swede. "There's only one thing wrong with the evening—we didn't get the book."

6. The Finished Desk

We slept late the next morning, so late that breakfast was finished and Mrs. Larson had gone downtown to do some shopping. She left a note on the kitchen table that said, "Anyone who sleeps as late as you two will have to shift for himself. There's melon in the refrigerator and eggs and bacon if you feel energetic enough to cook them. *Do not touch the chicken.* Mother."

While we ate breakfast we listened to the news on the radio. The weather forecast was "increasing cloudiness and rain this afternoon and Saturday." However, at the moment the sun was shining and it was a beautiful day. We decided it would be a shame to waste such a nice morning when it would probably be miserable over the week end, so we went down to the pool to talk things over and to swim.

"Let's go by and see how he's coming on the desk," I suggested as we got ready to leave the pool.

"All right," agreed Swede. "Do we act surprised if he mentions the book, or do we pretend that we knew it was there and just forgot to take it out?"

We discussed the question on the way over to Auerbach's and finally decided to act surprised. We found the front door open when we arrived, but Auerbach was not in sight. We walked in and strolled on back to his work-bench in the rear, not trying to be particularly quiet but not making a lot of noise either. The drawers were back in the desk, and it stood by itself in the center of the only clear area in the shop. I never pay any attention to furniture, but I had to admit that the desk was beautiful. The wood had a soft red color, and the grain was the nicest I've ever seen. For the first time I could see why the desk might be worth something.

"It's a honey," said Swede. "And he's done a beautiful job."

At that minute Clem Auerbach came out of the back room. He was in his undershirt as he had been that first day. Although there wasn't the usual three days' growth of beard on his face, he had worked up a good stubble since the night before.

"How do you like the desk?" he asked.

"It's wonderful," I said.

He rubbed his hand over the wood and smiled. I think he smiled at the desk instead of us, but his voice was almost friendly. "This is nice wood," he said. "And the desk is well made. It's a pleasure to work with furniture like this."

"I wouldn't know it for the same desk," said Swede.

"Yeah, I spruced it up a little, didn't I?" said Auerbach. It was hard to think of him as a thief as he stood there looking proudly at the desk. I wondered why I had been so scared the night before. Probably we were imagining things, and they had just been interested in the book because it was old and had been in the secret compartment. I was half inclined to ask him about it.

"Where'd you get hold of the desk?" he asked. His voice was casual, but his expression changed. His eyes took on a crafty look.

Swede gave me a warning look, so I said, "We had it in our clubroom upstairs in that big barn or carriage house at our place. I was going to paint it, and then my mother decided to have it refinished."

"You don't happen to know where she got it, do you?" he asked.

"I don't believe she ever told me where it came from," I said truthfully. "Why?"

"Oh, just curiosity," he said evasively. "If she can get any more furniture of this quality at the same place she ought to buy it."

"She buys antiques all over." I said. "Maybe she got it up in Vermont summer before last. I know she bought a lot of junk that trip. Dad complained half the way home about the car being so full of cracked plates and old bottles that he couldn't find room enough to stow his extra golf balls.

Of course if she bought the desk then she must have shipped it home. Then last year we took a trip down through Virginia, and she bought an old buggy and about fifteen jugs at an auction sale. That almost ended the trip, my father was so mad—"

"I just wondered," said Auerbach, who did not seem too interested in hearing about our trips. When I looked at Swede I almost lost control of myself and grinned.

"Is the desk finished?" Swede asked.

Auerbach seemed to hesitate and then he said, "Not quite. I've got just a little rubbing to do here and there. But it'll be finished by Monday for sure."

"Well, we didn't learn much," said Swede as we rode away.

"He didn't either," I said. "How'd you like my little talk?"

"I'd like to have a recording of that to play back to your mother someday," said Swede. "I'll bet she would be surprised at all the antique-buying she's done. And not very pleased."

We separated and went home for lunch. While I was eating, the sky began to cloud over. I went up to check on my pigeons, and I was still in the loft when it began to rain. I know that rain makes the flowers and vegetables grow and that we have to have it or we'd be living in a desert. Still, it always makes me sore to see it rain on Friday or

Saturday. Feeling that way is a habit one gets into during the school year. In the summertime Friday afternoon and Saturday aren't so much more important than any other day. I had just remembered that when I thought of something else—my work in American history. I was supposed to spend every Saturday studying until I wrote ten thousand words for Dad and Mrs. Hurlburt.

It was raining steadily by this time, a fine drizzly rain of the kind that usually lasts two or three days. I felt much better. Studying history wouldn't be half so bad in poor weather.

I spent part of the afternoon and evening looking through two or three American history books that we had around the house. The next morning I got out a notebook and a pencil and decided to start writing. The only trouble was that I couldn't decide what to write about. I couldn't find any subject that was worth ten thousand words and none that I could write more than five hundred about unless I started copying. Finally I went downstairs to see Dad. He was reading a book on gardening.

"I'd like to discuss this history business with you," I said.

"Go ahead," he said, putting his book down. "I'm glad to see that you're at work without my having to remind you."

"This business of ten thousand words on one subject. It can't be done."

"What do you mean, it can't be done?" he asked.

"You can't write that much about one subject," I said. "Why, even this history book doesn't have that much about any one subject, except maybe the American Revolution or the Civil War."

He took the book from me and thumbed through the pages. "A book like this is necessarily a sort of summary of the important events in American history. Now take the Civil War that you mentioned. This has one chapter. Thousands of volumes have been written about the Civil War—both fact and fiction. In fact, so much has been written about it that sometimes I think all writers and publishers must be descendants of Sherman or Lee. I'd just as soon you didn't pick the Civil War, but that illustrates my point. Suppose, for example, you decided to write on warfare between the Indians and the early settlers. You can probably find enough material in two or three days for six papers."

"Where?" I asked.

"You know perfectly well where," he said. "At the library. And right over there on the shelves are some factual books that might help if you pick the right subject. Or you could go down to Mr. McVaugh's and buy a used book or two for a quarter each from that bargain table he has."

The sounded like a much better idea than going to the library, because I have trouble in the summertime remembering to take my books back when they're due.

"The funds for this project," I said. "Where do they come from? Do I pay for things like books and paper out of my allowance?"

He reached in his pocket and handed me fifty cents. "You have a notebook and paper. This will buy some more paper. Now how many more questions have you before you quit stalling and get down to business?"

"One," I said. "What would keep me from going down to Mr. McVaugh's and buying an old book that probably you or Mrs. Hurlburt never read and copying ten thousand words from it?"

"Nothing," he said. "Except your conscience and your common sense. I think I could distinguish between your style and that of Morison or Commager, for example. However, I don't care one way or the other. Even in copying you can't help absorbing some information."

The rain stopped for a few minutes, so I said I was going down to Mr. McVaugh's or the library to do some research. I went to Mr. McVaugh's first, but his door was locked. He'd been unusually thoughtful of his customers because there was a note stuck in the edge of the glass that said, "Will be back about 11:30."

I went on to the library and took a look at the history section. To my amazement I found several books on the West that were classified as history and were better reading than a lot of cowboy stories I've seen. The first thing I

knew it was twelve o'clock, and the librarian was telling me that the library would be closed until three.

When I got home I found Dad in the kitchen, slicing bread. He had a chunk of liverwurst on the table and some cheese. "Your mother went out on some business about supplies or tickets or something to do with the flower show," he said. "Eileen went with her, and they won't be back for lunch. I said we'd shift for ourselves. Make yourself a sandwich."

I made myself a liverwurst sandwich with cheese, relish, and mustard on it. Dad poured two glasses of milk, and we sat down to eat.

"How'd you make out at the library?" he asked.

"I found a couple of good books about the Wild West," I said. "How would 'Famous Gun Battles of the West' be for a subject?"

"Well, I presume that qualifies technically as history," Dad admitted slowly. "Couldn't you find a subject nearer home?"

"There isn't anything interesting," I complained.

"There are hundreds of ideas if you look for them," he said. "Just take this house, for example. It's not old as houses go; it was built about eighteen forty or so. However, it's been standing here during a good part of this country's history. Horses used to be stabled out in that carriage house. The groom probably slept in the room you use as your

clubhouse. Just think of a carriage driving out of the lane, drawn by a team of prancing horses. Probably young men who slept in your room went off in the California gold rush; others went off to fight in the Civil War and the Spanish-American war."

"Gee, this house has seen a lot," I said.

"And some of the furniture in it has seen much more," he said. "Say, speaking of furniture, that desk that you and Swede were given is in the living room."

"What!" I shouted, dropping my sandwich and spilling part of my milk. I dashed into the living room and crawled into the kneehole to open the secret compartment. Not only was the light poor but my shoulders cut off much of what there was. I could see nothing and feel no latch or knob, so I backed out to turn on a light.

"What in the world are you doing?" Dad asked. He had followed me from the kitchen and was still munching his sandwich.

"There's a secret compartment in this desk," I said. "I want to see if there's anything in it."

"Should there be?" he asked.

"Uh-huh!" I said. I set a table lamp on the floor and crawled in to see if I could find how the door opened. I examined every square inch of the back without results. It seemed to be an ordinary panel with a couple of carved columns at each corner.

"What makes you think there's a secret compartment?" Dad asked.

"I saw Auerbach open it," I said.

"Why didn't you ask him how he did it?" asked Dad.

"Well," I said hesitantly, "I didn't want to make him suspicious."

"Just what is all this?" asked Dad. "Suppose we have a full explanation."

I started from the beginning, with our visit to Mr. McVaugh and his recommendation that we take the desk to Clem Auerbach. Then I explained how we had peeked through the window and had seen Auerbach and the other man looking at the book.

I didn't want to make the story too long, so I stopped there. Dad didn't ask any more questions, so I didn't bother with the part about being trapped in the building.

"I see," said Dad, getting interested. "You suspect that this book mentions some buried treasure or something valuable, and they plan to get this treasure if it still exists."

"And if they can find out where the desk came from," I added. "Swede and I were in his place yesterday, and he tried to worm the information out of us. I didn't tell him a thing."

"Umm," said Dad. "Well, I'm afraid your labor was in vain. Your Mr. Auerbach had quite a talk with your mother. Incidentally, he didn't look at all as you describe him. He

was shaved and had on a clean shirt and tie. Maybe he was out to impress."

"What did Mom tell him?" I asked.

"I don't know exactly," he said. "He brought the desk in and was quite pleased when your mother admired it so. Then he began admiring various pieces around the house. He asked where she got this and where she got that. To be absolutely frank with you, Neil, I've heard the history of some of these furniture bargains several times and I wasn't paying too much attention to the conversation. The first thing I knew they were back at the desk, and she was telling him that it belonged to a Miss Hankin and that it was going to be sold at the Antique Fair."

"She didn't tell him that it was given to Swede and me, did she?" I asked.

"I don't believe so," he answered. "I think she sort of skipped over the subject because of the delicate situation—Miss Hankin not knowing the plans and all that."

"That's good," I said with relief. "I told him I didn't know where it came from, that it was kicking around in our clubroom until Mother decided to refinish it."

"Let's see if we can open that secret compartment," he said. "Then perhaps we'll know if there's a real mystery or not."

He crawled into the kneehole and examined the back panel with no success. Then he rapped on it.

"Sounds hollow, doesn't it?" I asked.

"Yes, but I don't know how much that means. An ordinary panel might sound hollow. Well, there's one simple way to solve this matter."

He got up, and between us we turned the desk over on its back. Between the back of the kneehole and the back of the desk was a space of about four inches.

"There's a compartment there all right," Dad said. "A tall thin one."

He took hold of the carved columns and pushed and pulled and twisted. Finally one of them came loose in his hand, and beneath it was a crack where the secret door joined the rest of the desk. Dad pulled on a little brass nail, and the back of the kneehole swung open. In it was the book.

"Here it is," said Dad, handing it to me. "Go ahead and look for your treasure map."

I opened it to the first page. "Property of John Stout Hankin" was written on the flyleaf in a beautiful flowing script, the kind our penmanship teacher used to tell us we could all write if we would practice. I turned to the first page and read:

"Pine Hill Farm, January 1, 1855—Being newly the owner of Pine Hill Farm, it appears proper that some sort of record be kept of the activities of the farm, the crops

grown, the cattle or sheep raised or fattened, the income and the expenses, and, it is devoutly hoped, the profit each year. I feel especially obligated to keep an exact record of all financial matters until such time as I learn whether Rufus be alive or dead since he is to share equally according to the wish of our father. To this end I resolve to keep, if not a daily record of the expenditures and activities of the farm, at least an account of those matters of importance. John Stout Hankin."

"It isn't the smuggler's book at all," I said in a disappointed voice. "Rufus was the smuggler. This is his brother's."

"Huh?" said Dad. "Who was a smuggler, and what did he smuggle?"

"One of Miss Hankin's great-great-uncles, or something of the sort, was a smuggler during the Civil War," I said. "The man who wrote this book was his brother, Miss Hankin's grandfather."

"I think that would make the smuggler a great-uncle," Dad said. "Not that it makes any difference. I'm sorry that this mystery seems to be fizzling out, but before you give up completely you ought to read past the second page."

I turned to the next page and found that on January 2, 1855, John Hankin had inventoried the stock on Pine Hill Farm. He had a lot of animals, especially sheep.

13 milch cows	14 swine
5 heifer calves	8 draft horses
4 steer calves	6 saddle horses
119 ewes	4 coach horses
4 rams	

I didn't bother reading the list of poultry but turned to the next page. There he had entered the amount of grain and hay that he had on hand. Each day he entered information about the farm—the equipment he had on hand and its condition, the lumber and firewood that was cut, the amount of standing timber, and many other things. By the end of January he had covered the farm in detail, including how many acres were under cultivation, how many were in woodland, and the exact condition of each building and the repairs that were needed.

"Come on out in the kitchen," Dad said. "There's no use starving while we read that."

I followed him into the kitchen, where we sat down together at the table. We ate sandwiches and turned through the pages. After John Hankin had completed the inventory, the book became sort of a diary. He told where he went, who he saw, and what he read. He was especially thorough about what he read. Almost every day he would enter the number of pages that he had covered in whatever book he happened to be reading. He seemed to be more

interested in history than in fiction. Now and then he read books on farming and land management.

In the early part of April he began to tell what fields he had plowed, what he sowed, and how he planned to manage his crops. For example, on April 15, Saul, who must have been a hired man, began plowing the ten-acre meadow at the foot of the hill. Mr. Hankin wrote that he planned to lime the field heavily and turn it into pasture for the sheep, who sorely needed more forage.

Often he would write about what his wife did during the day—that she churned butter or that she made some cookies that were unusually tasty. In June he began remodeling the library, since he said there was not enough space to "properly accommodate the many fine books which I have accumulated through the years and expect to accumulate in the future, God willing."

We flipped over the pages, glancing at the entries. I would have been finished much sooner, but Dad was interested every time he saw a tabulation of prices—what Mr. Hankin sold his cattle or grain for, or what Mrs. Hankin paid for food. The record stopped suddenly toward the end of August. There were seventy or eighty blank pages after the last entry, and nothing else.

"Nothing!" I said bitterly. "Just a dry old record of a farm!"

"It's not dry at all," Dad said. "It's a bit of American

history, and it's very interesting. Didn't you see that account of a fox hunt back there somewhere? That ought to interest even you. Think of the prices of some of the food they bought in those days. Sirloin steak, twelve cents a pound!"

"Maybe the price of steak was what Clem and his friend were so interested in," I said. "Well, I'd better call Swede and tell him the score."

"You are the most easily discouraged detective I've ever encountered," Dad said. "How do you know that on May fifth, for instance, after shearing his sheep, he didn't bury the family jewels under the pin oak on the west side of the house? He tells everything else he did."

"He doesn't even mention Rufus, the smuggler," I objected. "He would be the one who would have a fortune, not a farmer."

"This farmer was landed gentry," said Dad. "I notice he kept hired men and two servants. Frankly I don't think you'll find a thing, but you will have to read every single word to be sure."

I called Swede, and he came over an hour later. When he arrived I was about half finished with a more careful reading of the journal. After I got started the record was interesting, even if it didn't have anything about the smuggler.

"Those were the days," I said to Swede when he appeared.

"They rode horses everywhere and spent half their time hunting and fishing."

We read the rest of the journal together, but there was no mention of the smuggler nor of any hidden treasure of any kind. Once John Hankin recorded having invested three thousand dollars with some firm on Chestnut Street in Philadelphia, but that was the largest sum of money mentioned.

When we finished with the journal we went downstairs. "Not a thing," I told Dad. "I guess we were imagining things."

"That man did look very interested in something, though," said Swede sadly.

"Maybe he was one of those peculiar people who are interested in history," Dad observed dryly. "Actually, you didn't hear what they were saying, so they might have been discussing something else entirely even when they were apparently looking at that book."

"Yeah," I agreed. "Well, I suppose the thing to do is to give the book back to Miss Hankin."

"She'll probably be very happy to get it," Dad agreed. "As long as this mystery has simmered down to nothing, I don't see much point in bothering your mother with the matter of Clem Auerbach's reputation—or the amateur detecting you two have been doing. I used to get into situations

that could have been dangerous when I was your age, and I always managed to squeeze out somehow. The attitude I took was that after everything had turned out all right it was silly to worry my mother with details."

"That sounds sensible," I agreed, thinking about squeezing under that sofa at Auerbach's.

"Well, I wanted to play golf, and it rained," he said. "We've all been disappointed today. What say we go downtown and bowl a few games and have a soda or something?"

7. The Mysterious Hiker

On Monday morning we took our fishing gear and the old journal and went out to see Miss Hankin. We rode our bikes this time. As Swede said, back in the days of John Stout Hankin we probably would have had no trouble catching a ride. Now, a hundred years later, the roads were practically deserted.

We arrived about ten o'clock. As we rode up the lane we saw the top of Miss Hankin's wide floppy hat above what seemed to be a weed patch. We shouted hello, and she turned and waved. She was shoulder deep in weeds but she motioned for us to join her. We found a narrow path and walked toward her. She was in what had been a good-sized vegetable garden at one time, judging from the remains of the fence. In the very middle of it she had cleared a spot about twenty feet square and had planted lettuce, peas, beans, tomatoes, and a few other vegetables. She hadn't wasted time and effort, planting more than she would eat, the way most gardeners do. The row of carrots wasn't more than three feet long, and there were four tomato plants.

However, the few plants that were in her garden looked healthy and well tended.

Miss Hankin was standing off to one side in the weeds with a small box in her hand. "Strawberries," she said, holding up the box. "They've practically gone back to the wild state, but they're delicious. Won't you have some?"

We both took a couple of strawberries. She was right; they were the sweetest strawberries I'd ever eaten. "Now actually take some," she urged, holding out the box.

The strawberries were small, and she didn't have many in the box. "We'll have some but we'll pick them ourselves," Swede said.

"Why don't you look at this while we pick strawberries?" I suggested, handing her the journal. "We found it in the desk you gave us."

The Antique Fair wasn't for another week, and we had been told to say nothing about our plans until the desk was sold. However, we could see no reason not to give her the book.

She opened the journal and read the name on the flyleaf. "John Stout Hankin!" she said. "Why, bless me, it's Grandfather's! Where did you find it?"

"There was a secret compartment at the back of the kneehole," I said.

"Trust a couple of boys to find a secret compartment," she said. "Here I've had that desk all these years and have

never known about it. In fact I thought the desk belonged to Rufus."

She began reading the journal, standing there in the weeds, while we picked strawberries. She chuckled and shook her head at some of the entries, forgetting about us entirely. The strawberries were small and hard to find in the high weeds, and we ate as many as we picked, but in thirty minutes or so we had two boxes filled.

"Do you have any more boxes?" Swede asked.

"Have you filled them both?" she asked. "I guess I've been very impolite, reading while you two worked. One box is all the strawberries I'll use. Let's go on back to the house."

She made a pitcher of lemonade and brought it and some cookies outdoors, where we all sat around an old wooden table that was about to fall apart. The cookies were delicious, but after having been told about how poor she was I felt I was robbing her with every bite I took. Then I remembered the money she would get from the desk and decided I would have a couple more.

"I'm awfully glad you found this," she said happily, pointing to the journal. "Did you read that about the new hat he brought my grandmother from Philadelphia? It's wonderful."

"I just glanced at it," I said.

"Did your grandfather live on a different farm?" Swede

asked. "That says 'Pine Hill Farm,' not 'Burnt Hill.'"

"This used to be called Pine Hill," said Miss Hankin. "There were some big tall pines around the yard. I don't know exactly where, since that was before my time. When the mob burned all the buildings most of the pine trees were killed. Everyone began calling the farm Burnt Hill, and finally we did too. Grandfather John continued to call it Pine Hill, though, until he died."

"He didn't keep the journal very long," I said. "I wonder why he stopped."

"Grandfather was not very systematic," she said with a smile. "You may have noticed that this started out to be a financial record, and by the time he had kept it a month it was a diary. He was a great reader and lived in a sort of dream world. I imagine that keeping any sort of record was just too much for him. Then, too, Rufus might have come back. You see, Rufus ran away to sea several years before my great-grandfather died. I think when he returned he was happy to sell his half of the farm to John and go back to sea again."

"We thought at first that this might belong to Rufus," I said. "And that it would tell where he had buried a treasure."

She gave a funny little tinkling laugh at that. "Bless you, no, Rufus never buried any treasure," she said. "I think you've got smuggling confused with piracy, and I'm not

certain that most pirates didn't die paupers. Poor Rufus was always on the verge of making a tremendous fortune but always desperately in need of cash. He used the money from his half of the estate to buy his first ship. Time after time he came back and borrowed money from Grandfather."

"Your grandfather must have made money farming," said Swede.

"He did," said Miss Hankin. "He was vague and dreamy but he was a good farmer. The reason he made money though, was that my grandmother, Rebecca, actually ran the finances. She was a brilliant woman. I can still remember how indignant she would get when she spoke about the money Grandfather loaned Rufus. 'Rufus wanted to be a desperate bold adventurer,' she used to say, 'but he couldn't make a living at it, so we farmers had to finance his romantic daydreams.' "

I felt sort of sorry for Rufus. He'd apparently had a lot of tough luck. Of course, as Miss Hankin had told us the first day, she didn't know what finally became of him. He might have made a fortune eventually, out in the South Seas, diving for pearls or trading with the natives. It didn't seem right, somehow, for a smuggler to have to borrow money all the time from a brother who was a farmer. I felt the way I had the time I met Swede's cousin, the one who won all the medals on Okinawa. He wouldn't go hunting with us;

he said the noise of a gun had always scared him stiff.

"Are you two planning on fishing in the millpond?" asked Miss Hankin, looking at our rods, which were lying beside our bikes.

"We thought we would if it was all right with you," said Swede.

"It certainly is," she said. "Perhaps I'll come down and join you. I just use an old stick and worms, though. I suppose I'd disgrace you."

"You'd probably catch two fish to our one," said Swede.

"I won't be down before one o'clock at the earliest," said Miss Hankin. "So you can go in swimming in perfect safety this morning."

We went on down to the mill and fished for half an hour or so with no luck. I suppose that water was too filled with worms and bugs that had been washed in by the rain over the week end. We put our rods down and went in swimming until noon. We were eating our lunch when Miss Hankin appeared through the trees, carrying a short bamboo pole.

She picked up a stick and scratched around in the ground for a minute and then held up a big fat worm. I wished that I had a camera to take a picture. There she stood in her long skirt, high-button shoes, and big garden hat, looking like something out of a picture album but calmly putting this big fat worm on a fishhook. She flipped the hook and worm

into the water and sat down on a rock. "I used to get frogs over there on the other bank," she said. "With a sling shot. Sometimes I'd get five or six in a morning. Big ones too, that made delicious eating."

We all fished for a while. Miss Hankin caught a few more fish than we did, but of course she knew the pool. While we fished she told us about the old stone building. It had been a sawmill, not a grain mill, and the Hankin family had run it for years. At one time, when the countryside had been covered with huge first-growth trees, the mill had run the year round and had kept four men busy.

"Great-Grandfather Hankin made a small fortune from it." She told us. "Most of the old houses in this area were made from lumber sawed in that mill. Also he sold a lot of fine hardwoods to cabinetmakers. By the time John Stout Hankin started that journal you found, the mill operated only a few months a year. I remember seeing it run only once—when I was a very small girl."

"It was certainly built to last," said Swede. "That door at the top of the stairs looks like it belongs in a jail."

Miss Hankin gave one of her funny little laughs. "Only it was built to keep people out, not in," she said. "Have you noticed the big wooden bar and the two huge iron brackets or holders on the inside. I'll tell you about that. Fraidycat Mullins used to live there.

"Fraidycat Mullins worked for my grandfather for years

on the farm and lived down here. Why he chose to live down here I'll never know, because he was afraid of the woods and afraid of any animal larger than a rabbit. That's why we used to call him 'Fraidycat.' He rebuilt that door and put that huge bar across it. He was afraid someone would try to rob him and might murder him in his sleep. It was all sort of silly because we never had any prowlers and besides he had very little worth stealing."

"What did he do during the daytime when he was gone?" asked Swede. "He couldn't put the bar across the door from the outside."

"He had that big storeroom," said Miss Hankin. "There was a lock big enough for a city gate. The key was enormous."

"It's still there, hanging on a nail," I said. "And the lock works too."

"He used to work around the farm with that key, on a leather thong, tied to his belt," said Miss Hankin. "When we were small we didn't see anything unusual about it because he had marvelous things locked up in that storeroom. We used to tease him to let us visit it. It was a wonderful experience. At one end there used to be hams, sides of bacon, dried peppers, beans, and all sorts of things. The whole room smelled of smoke and spice. The other end was a clutter of boxes and chests which were filled with treasures. He had been a sailor at one time and he still had all his

uniforms. There was a box of old knives and guns and swords that he'd gathered all over the world. Another one had the most wonderful collection of sea shells. Then there was a collection of carved wood and ivory pieces from the far East, and dozens of little puzzle boxes. You had to slide certain pieces out, or press on certain spots, to open them. Every time my sister and I came down to visit him he would give us something as a present."

"I wonder why he was so afraid," I said. "That doesn't fit in with his being a sailor and going all over the world."

"It does seem a little odd," said Miss Hankin. "But then, people do strange things. I suppose that a lot of people think it strange that I live out here all alone. Its memories of such things as Fraidycat Mullins' storeroom that make me want to live here until I die. You see, I have no interests anywhere else and no relatives except a nephew whom I scarcely know. He has his own family, and I wouldn't want to bother them by going to live with them. So I stay on here. I don't see the place as it actually is, overgrown with weeds and falling apart. I see it as it once was, a well-kept farm with happy people living here."

Swede and I didn't say anything for a while. We felt sort of sad for Miss Hankin, but when we looked at her she didn't seem sad. She had a bite just then and pulled in a nice bass.

"What became of Fraidycat Mullins and his treasures?"

I asked. He might have had a real treasure without her knowing about it. I hadn't seen any mention of him in the journal, but a wonderful idea came to me. There might have been an extra page stuck in the book, and Auerbach and his friend might have taken it out.

"He died here," said Miss Hankin. "He had a married daughter who came and took his belongings away."

"How did people get down here to the mill?" asked Swede. "I haven't seen any road."

"The road went right up through that ravine to the top of the hill," said Miss Hankin. "It joined the highway in back of the barn."

"Highway?" asked Swede, thinking of the back roads we'd used.

"There used to be a road in back of the barn that followed the ridge of the hills almost to Belleville," said Miss Hankin. "It's odd how quickly landmarks disappear and are forgotten. That used to be called the Hill Highway and was a well-traveled road. Then they put a road in on the other side of the farm buildings, and eventually that one disappeared and became part of the fields again. The new road was built when I was about twelve. The Hill Highway gradually became impassable for wagons and buggies; but for many years people used to ride over it on horseback. It became more and more overgrown, although even twenty-five or thirty years ago the young men around here followed

it when they hunted. It's several miles shorter, if you should happen to be walking to Belleville."

Miss Hankin fished for about an hour and then went back to the house. She threw back all but her two largest fish, and these she put in a little basket she had brought with her. We watched her climbing the hill, with the basket hanging from her arm and the pole over her shoulder. Her long skirt didn't seem to bother her as she walked up the steep slope. Swede and I had scrambled up and down, holding onto trees and roots, but she walked, standing as straight as could be, as though there wasn't any hill there.

"She must know a path," Swede said as we watched her threading her way through the trees.

We left about four o'clock and pedaled leisurely back toward town. Off to our left was the tree-covered range of hills where Miss Hankin had said the road once ran. About two miles from town a small crossroad ran over the hill. We had been over it a number of times and knew that it eventually joined a cement highway that led into town from a different direction.

"Let's go that way," suggested Swede. "It won't take much longer, and maybe we can see some signs of that old road. It ought to cross this."

The hill was too steep for bike riding, so we got off and walked. By the time we got to the top we were both out of breath and we sat down to rest. The top of the hill was a

flat plateau almost an eighth of a mile across. We were about to look for signs of the old road, the Hill Highway, when Swede grabbed my arm and pointed.

"Look!" he whispered. "A buck!"

I looked, and there in the trees, just a short distance from the road, was a beautiful buck deer. It was a big deer but it must have been a young one because I couldn't see any antlers. We have lots of deer in our section of New Jersey, but I had never seen one that close before. Sometimes at night, when I've been in the car with my father, I've seen them run across the road, but when that happens there is a flash and they are gone. This was different. We sat there four or five minutes watching the buck while he grazed. He kept working closer to the road and finally he leaped the ditch and stood out in the open, apparently trying to decide whether to go on across or to turn back. Suddenly he lifted his head and seemed to be listening. Then he turned like a flash and in two leaps had disappeared into the woods.

We sat there, staring at the spot where the deer had disappeared, trying to figure out what had scared him.

Farther on down the road a man came out of the woods, crossed the road, and disappeared in the trees on the other side. He was too far away for us to see his face clearly, but he was close enough so that we got a good idea of his build and general appearance. He was wearing dark trousers, a felt hat, and a khaki jacket.

"He looked familiar," I said. "I wonder who he was?"

"I think I know," said Swede. "I had a chance to watch him walk when I followed him downtown a few days ago."

"Clem Auerbach!" I said.

We waited a minute or two and then went on to where we thought he had come out of the woods. Running at right angles to our road was what appeared to be the old Hill Highway. Trees and underbrush grew in it, but they were smaller than the others in the woods. Also the bigger rocks had been moved from the old roadway and lined the edges.

"It's the old road," said Swede, "but what's Auerbach doing hiking over it?"

"I don't know, but let's go back to town as fast as we can," I said. "We can beat him to his shop easily. We'll find out if he's there. If he's not, we'll hang around a while and see if he comes back."

Going down the hill was much easier than going up. We coasted as fast as we dared and were back in town long before anyone could possibly have walked there. When we arrived at Number 22 Center Street we found the door locked.

"I'll ask him something about refinishing a table if he's here," I said, pounding on the door.

No one answered, although we made quite a racket. We walked up and down the opposite side of the street, pushing

our bikes, for at least twenty minutes, but no one appeared. When it got near dinnertime we gave up and started home. We rode through the business section, and as we passed the Sunny Corner Café we saw him. He was sitting at the counter, eating, and he was wearing a khaki jacket.

"That's who it was," I said confidently. "He stopped to eat on his way home."

"That's probably it," said Swede. "There are lots of jackets, like that, though. Every Army store is full of them. Also, how would he know about that old road?"

"I don't know," I said. "But I think the Carson Street Detective Agency ought to get back to work on this case. We need to do some more investigating."

8. The Watcher

During part of the summer vacation Swede worked for his father. He was the same age as I was, fifteen, but he was as good with a hammer and a saw as most regular carpenters. Mr. Larson was always building something and he usually employed at least three or four carpenters. Whether Swede worked or not depended on what was being built. Some people are fussy about new houses and get peculiar ideas. I suppose some of them felt that a boy couldn't drive a nail that would hold, and the house might fall down as a result. Also, on the larger building projects there was the possibility that some of the union workers would object because Swede didn't belong to the carpenters' union. The way things worked out, Swede had a job about half the time, which was a good arrangement. He had time enough to go hunting and fishing, and yet he worked enough to earn spending money.

He expected to be busy on a new garage for the remainder of the week, which left me at loose ends. I had planned to watch Clem Auerbach and do some investigating.

However, I didn't know where to start with an investigation or exactly what I wanted to investigate. Also, shadowing someone soon gets awfully tiresome when you are alone. I went over to Center Street early Tuesday morning, but either Auerbach had gone or was asleep in back, because the front door was locked. I waited around about an hour and saw nothing. During the day I made a dozen trips past his shop and found exactly the same thing every time. The door was locked, and no one could be seen.

On Wednesday I decided to forget about Clem Auerbach and train my two new pigeons.

A friend of my father's from Allentown had given me two pigeons as squabs. They were real Antwerp homing pigeons, the kind that can fly hundreds or even thousands of miles. They were just about full grown and were able to fly about the neighborhood when the female disappeared. I suppose some cat got her or she was shot. Albert was left all alone.

Each morning I let Albert out for an exercise flight, and he came back when he felt like it. That was usually within an hour because I didn't feed him until he returned. As soon as he flew away I put feed in the pen for him. When he came back he had to go through a trapdoor to get the feed, and then he was locked in the pen for the remainder of the day.

During the spring he had taken longer and longer flights

each morning, until I began to worry that he might not come back at all. Then one day he brought another pigeon back with him. The new pigeon was just an ordinary barnyard pigeon, the kind you see everywhere in parks in the city and on farms in the country. Albert and this pigeon had four squabs, the first pair of which were almost full grown by this time and big enough to train.

All pigeons get very attached to the place where they are raised, and most of them will try to return home if you take them someplace else and let them loose. The only real difference between homing pigeons and ordinary pigeons is that the homing variety is faster and can fly longer distances. They have been bred for these characteristics for years. I've read quite a bit about pigeons, and some of the facts are amazing. Pigeons have crossed oceans to get home again. They've been shot or hurt, and after they recovered, months later, they still went home.

I didn't plan on entering any pigeon races and I didn't expect to be releasing my pigeons from any great distances. These two new pigeons might never be in Albert's class, but I thought I'd try training them. They would do to send messages from Swede's house to mine or for other short trips.

I put Albert and the two pigeons in a wicker basket and then bicycled out to the edge of town. I let them all loose together so that the two young ones could follow Albert and learn the way home. Some people say that a pigeon goes

home entirely by instinct, others say that he may know the general direction by instinct but that he has to be able to recognize the area around his home to find his way back to the pen. Anyhow, the safest method of training a pigeon is to let it follow an experienced bird at first.

By the time I got back home all three pigeons had arrived and were eating. I put them in the basket again and took them off in the opposite direction. After lunch I tried two more flights.

The next day I released them one by one. I'd toss one in the air and wait until he disappeared before I released the next one. I let Albert go last. If the others had stopped some place along the way, I thought they might possibly join Albert when he went by.

They did very well by themselves, and on Friday and Saturday mornings I took them quite a distance and released them at different places. They were all in the pen, eating, by the time I got back.

Training the pigeons took only a short time each day, and on Thursday I decided to do some more work on that history paper. I hated to have it hanging over my head all summer. But I still hadn't decided what to write about, and I went to Mr. McVaugh's to hunt for ideas.

Mr. McVaugh was in the back of his shop, reading. He didn't seem annoyed at my coming in, as he sometimes does. In fact, he was actually friendly.

"Good morning, Neil," he said. "What can I do for you?"

"I'm looking for an old history book," I said.

"How old?" he asked. "Would you like Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* or something older? The Egyptian empire, perhaps?"

"No, I wanted American history."

"I have a great many books on American history," he said with enthusiasm. "If I specialize in anything with my books, it's Americana. Just mention what phase of American history you're interested in particularly."

"I'm not much interested in any of it," I said frankly. "But I have to write a paper."

I told him about Mrs. Hurlburt and my history course and why I had to write a paper. "It's hard to find anything to write about," I said.

"Nonsense," said Mr. McVaugh. "There are hundreds and thousands of subjects that are fascinating—even to a lad like you who thinks he doesn't like history. The trouble with history courses in school is that the time is too limited. There isn't half enough time to cover the barest outline of what has happened in the world and in this country. Every subject has to be boiled down to the barest of facts. Now, when you get into the details surrounding these facts, history becomes absorbing."

He picked up the book he had been reading. "Now here's a book called *The History of New Jersey* by a man named

Smith. It was written before the American Revolution. Astounding, isn't it? A history of this state written before you thought it had any history. At best, the average history book has a paragraph or two about the early settlers here, and that is all you will find about New Jersey prior to the Revolution." He held up the book. "But all this happened. Did you know that wolves and wildcats were so numerous in those days that the early settlers often lost much of their livestock? Also that one of the oldest Indian villages in these parts was about three miles from here?"

"Where?" I asked.

"Right at the base of that big hill on the right-hand side of the road out by the traffic circle. There is a big spring there, and the Indians camped near it because of the good water. Why don't you write a paper about how people lived in Colonial New Jersey—what they ate, how they earned their living, what sort of houses they had? For that matter, you could write about the same things a hundred years ago, and it would be interesting."

"That's an idea," I said. "I know where there's a journal that was written in eighteen fifty-five about life on a farm near here."

"Where is that?" he asked. "I'd like to see it myself."

"We found it in the desk we had refinished," I told him. "I gave it to Miss Hankin, but she'd let me have it back."

I decided to tell him the whole story about the journal.

He listened very carefully and he didn't smile or say a word when I told how suspicious we had been of Clem Auerbach.

"I don't blame you a bit for wondering what was going on," he said. "Frankly, Clem Auerbach is most unlikely to have the slightest interest in any account of farm life in eighteen fifty-five unless he thought there would be some profit for him. I can't speak with authority for his friends, but they would tend to be of the same frame of mind."

"But we read every word and couldn't find a thing," I said.

"Perhaps you overlooked something or didn't understand some reference," he said. "If you borrow the journal from Miss Hankin for your history paper, let me read it. I'd enjoy it and I might find your missing clue."

"I'll bring it down," I promised. "By the way, do you happen to know anything about the old Hill Highway that used to run out toward Burnt Hill?"

"I've never heard of it," he said. "However, that doesn't mean anything. Burnt Hill is over to the northwest, isn't it?"

"Off there," I said, pointing.

"I have a large-scale map of this area, dated eighteen forty or thereabouts," he said thoughtfully. He went over to a big cabinet and pulled out one of its wide shallow drawers. Then he put his nose down to within an inch or so of the drawer and began to hunt for the map he wanted.

He took at least ten minutes. I was itching to push his glasses down from his forehead so he could see, but I was afraid he might not like it. Finally he found the map and spread it out on the table. It was on yellowed old paper, so fragile I was afraid to touch it. The date in the corner was 1843.

Mr. McVaugh had his nose so close to the map that I couldn't see much. However, as his head moved around looking for the Hill Highway I got an idea of the area the map covered. There were not nearly so many roads in 1843, and some of the present towns around Belleville weren't in existence. Other towns had different names then, and in a few cases there were villages shown that have since disappeared.

"Can't seem to find the road," said Mr. McVaugh, looking in the wrong corner of the map.

"It's probably in small print," I said. "Maybe you need your glasses."

"Good idea," he said, pushing his glasses down over his eyes. He moved his head back a reasonable distance from the table. Once we were both able to look at the map, we found Hill Highway in a few seconds. As Miss Hankin said, it ran along the top of the range of hills almost all the way from Belleville to the Delaware River.

"Why would Clem Auerbach be hiking along that?" I asked.

"Probably he wanted to go out to Burnt Hill," said Mr. McVaugh matter-of-factly. "I don't think he has a car, so if he wanted to visit Burnt Hill he would have to walk or hitch-hike. Hitch-hiking involves witnesses, and when a man is out to steal something he dislikes witnesses."

"You think he went out there to steal something?" I asked.

"Certainly," snorted McVaugh. "He wouldn't take an eight-mile hike to pay a social call. He's not socially minded."

"How would he know about this road?" I asked.

"He grew up on a farm about three miles from Burnt Hill," Mr. McVaugh said. "He probably hunted and fished all through those hills. I knew Clem when he was a little boy. His father was a carpenter and a fine cabinetmaker; he had a little place of about ten acres that, properly speaking, wasn't a farm at all. He raised a few pigs, kept a cow, and had some chickens. He made his living by carpentry work and cabinet-making when there was any to be done. When I first started in business I took all my furniture-repair work to him. He and his wife spent every cent they had trying to get Clem out of scrapes and trouble of one sort or another. When he was finally sent to prison for robbing a store in Trenton, I think the shock shortened their lives. Anyhow they never lived to see their son get out of prison. But to get back to the subject, I wouldn't be surprised if Clem

Auerbach knows the old Hill Highway. Also he probably knows Miss Hankin when he sees her."

"Do you think I ought to see the police?" I asked. "She might not be safe out there."

"You haven't anything to see the police *about*," Mr. McVaugh said. "You saw Clem and his friend looking at a book, and they seemed interested. They put the book back in the desk where it belonged, however, and you couldn't find anything to support your theory when you read the journal. Then later you saw a man who looked like Clem hiking through the woods. He was only two miles or so from town and may never have been near Burnt Hill. I'm inclined to agree with you that there is reason to be suspicious, but I doubt if anyone else would. What would Miss Hankin say if you talked to her?"

"I think she'd laugh at me," I admitted. "She doesn't seem to be afraid of anything and, what's more, she says there's nothing worth stealing in her house. We happened to be talking about burglars one time."

"There you are," said Mr. McVaugh. "I don't see that there is much more you can do unless you get something definite to support your suspicion. I doubt if Miss Hankin is in any physical danger. Clem Auerbach is not a murderer, as I told you once before. He has done a little embezzling and a spot or two of burglary, but he works with a jimmy and a flashlight, not a gun. I don't think he was

ever caught carrying a gun. Of course a man who is surprised red-handed rifling a safe might lose his head and hurt someone; there is always that danger."

"I think I ought to do something," I said.

"The only thing I can suggest is that you check up every couple of days to see that nothing has happened to Miss Hankin. You can suit yourself about warning her. I don't know the woman, and, in spite of what you said about her not being afraid of anything, you might worry her to no purpose. What could you tell her to watch? She can't do much about preventing a mysterious something from being stolen when she has no idea what that something is or where it's located. Suppose, for example, there is a buried treasure, as you would like to believe. It might be buried any place on the farm. She couldn't patrol the woods and fields, and if she did she'd leave the house unguarded."

I couldn't find anything wrong with Mr. McVaugh's line of reasoning except that it left me feeling dissatisfied. It seemed that there should be something I could do. However, there wasn't much use in talking about the matter forever. While I was thinking, he changed the subject.

"I'll have a photostat made of this map if you decide to base your paper on that journal." He looked at me and actually smiled. "There's nothing like a map attached to a paper to give it a scholarly look."

"That would be a big help," I said. "I really ought to have

something in addition to the information that I get from the journal."

"In that case I'll lend you two other books," he said enthusiastically. "I have a geography of New Jersey published about then, and an almanac. They will give you all the general information you need—the population, principal industries, the names of the important officials, and material of that nature."

I took the two books, and on my way home I stopped to see Mrs. Hurlburt. She thought the idea was a good one, so I went to work, reading and making notes. That evening Swede came over, and we talked over the Auerbach-Hankin case.

"I agree with Mr. McVaugh," Swede said. "What can we do except to keep an eye on her to see that she's safe?"

I went out to see Miss Hankin and to borrow the journal the next afternoon. It wasn't much fun, riding out alone, and I imagined all sorts of things as I pedaled along the back roads. I took Albert and the two younger pigeons along to give them exercise and to have them as messengers in case of emergency. However, Miss Hankin was out working in the garden when I arrived, and everything was as usual. She was pleased that I wanted to borrow the journal and told me to keep it as long as I liked. I stayed half an hour or so and then went back to town.

It rained all day Saturday, but Swede worked with his

father anyhow, doing the finishing work on the inside of the garage. I worked on my paper and kept one eye on the window, hoping the rain would stop. Although the sky looked promising several times, it was almost dinnertime before the clouds broke and the rain stopped. Swede came over again after dinner, and we decided to ride out to Burnt Hill instead of going to the movies as we had planned.

We were almost there by the time it got dark. For the last mile we got off and walked because the road was filled with fair-sized rocks and riding was dangerous. We both had lights on our bikes, but we didn't want to turn them on while we were near Burnt Hill. If anyone except Miss Hankin was there we wanted to be able to sneak up unseen.

We could see a faint light as we turned into the lane. About a hundred yards from the house we put our bikes in the weeds and went on very quietly.

We peeked in through one of the rear windows. Neither one of us had ever been in the house or had any idea what the inside looked like. We found ourselves looking into the kitchen. It was a big room with a beamed ceiling and a fireplace big enough to roast a steer. Miss Hankin was seated in the middle of the room beside a round table, reading a book by the light of a kerosene lamp. In back of her, in a corner, was a single bed. Near it was a sink with a funny old cistern pump. Near the fireplace was an old-fashioned kitchen range with a warming oven. There were a few

chairs, several cupboards, and a bureau that she must have used to hold her clothes.

"Look at the dog," whispered Swede. "Some watchdog!"

"She said he was deaf that first day," I said, looking at the black dog asleep at her feet.

We had started to make a circuit of the house when the geese began making an awful racket. Miss Hankin didn't need a watchdog as long as she kept them. We couldn't see any reason to wait around or to alarm Miss Hankin by telling her we were there. We went back down the lane, picked up our bikes, and started for town.

After two trips and finding everything as usual, we decided it would be a waste of time to go out there Sunday. Also Swede saw Miss Hankin at church and she said she planned to spend the day at the Wilsons'. We knew she was safe, so we spent the afternoon playing tennis and swimming.

About nine o'clock Monday morning Swede and I started out on an all-day hike. We caught a ride out the highway until we came to the crossroad where we had seen the buck deer and Clem Auerbach some days before. After climbing up the hill we turned into the wood, along the old Hill Highway.

Now and then we had trouble following the old road, but each time we lost it we found it within a few minutes. It followed the very top of the ridge most of the way. It was

interrupted by four crossroads, and in one place someone had built a house right in the middle of what had been the highway. In those areas where the tops of the hills were flat some of the woods had been cleared and the land turned into cultivated fields. When you stood in the middle of one of these high fields you could see for miles down over the valleys on either side.

The greater part of the road was through timber, however, and a man could have hiked along it without worrying about being seen. By making a few detours it would have been possible to circle the fields and the one house without leaving the protection of the woods.

It was well after eleven o'clock when we caught our first glimpse of Burnt Hill. A few minutes later we followed the road out of the trees and stood looking down on the house and outbuildings. Although Burnt Hill was actually a hill, we were on a still higher one. We could see faint traces of the old road, going across the fields and passing behind the barn.

"If we moved off to the right, part way down the slope, we could see the side door that she uses," I said.

"Let's go down there and eat our lunch," Swede said. "I'm starving."

He was leading as we started down the slope. We had gone about fifty feet and were pushing our way through a clump of bushes when Swede stopped.

"This is it," he said. "Clem Auerbach has been watching the house from right here."

I joined him and looked down at the ground. It was littered with several old paper bags, matches, and dozens of cigarette butts. Some of the bushes had been pulled up, and a small spot of ground had been smoothed off so one could sit down comfortably.

"He must have sat here several days, watching the house," Swede said. "He probably brought his lunch in the bags."

The spot was perfect for watching the house. You could sit down and still see the house, the outbuildings, and the lane through a screen of bushes.

"I wonder how many days he spent here," Swede said. "Also I wonder if he's through."

"He may be around here now," I said, turning to look behind me. "We might have scared him away."

"I don't like this," said Swede. "I wish we hadn't talked so loud."

We crouched down in the bushes and whispered. We decided that if we had scared Clem Auerbach away he probably would not change his mind and come back while we were there. Then we had a brilliant idea. We decided to count the cigarette butts. We searched the ground for about ten feet around and counted eighty-six cigarette stubs. "More than four packs," Swede said. "And we may have missed a few. He must have spent five or six full days here."

"All but a few are soaking wet," I said. "That means they were left here before it quit raining Saturday evening."

We looked again and found only four cigarette butts that were dry. That meant that whoever had been watching the house had spent only a short time in his hideout since Saturday. He had been there either on Sunday or just before we came.

"Even the dry ones are slightly damp," Swede said, examining them closely. "I'll bet they were left here yesterday."

"Umhuh," I said. "And I think I know what happened. He came here early yesterday morning and smoked four cigarettes while he watched. Then he saw Miss Hankin leave for church, so he went down and spent the day hunting for whatever it is that he's trying to find."

"And if he had all day he ought to have found it," Swede said. "I wish we could be certain whether or not he came back today."

"Well, if he found what he was looking for we'll never know," I said. "If he didn't, he'll probably be back. Let's spy on this spot to see if he does any more spying on the house."

"All right," said Swede. "Only I've got a better idea than hiking out or riding our bikes out every day. Let's come out here and camp for a week."

"Starting tomorrow," I agreed.

9. The Glass of Water

We were not able to start our camping trip the next day as we planned. Both Swede and I had some difficulty with our families. I spent most of Monday evening trying to convince Mother and Father that the old mill at Burnt Hill was a perfect spot to camp and that the perfect time to start was Tuesday morning.

"I'm not at all enthusiastic about your camping out there," Mother said. "From what you have told me, it's almost completely isolated. You could camp out in the middle of the Adirondacks and be closer to civilization."

"The whole idea of camping is to get away from civilization," I pointed out.

"Your mother means that you would be closer to help in case you needed it," my father said. "If you went to that lake in the Poconos that you were extolling all winter, there would be other campers around, and also the big lodge, if you needed anyone or wanted a decent meal for a change."

"A decent meal!" I said, feeling insulted. "You ought to eat some of the meals Swede and I cook over a campfire."

"I'm satisfied with your mother's cooking, thank you," Dad said.

"Suppose it rains for three or four days," Mother said. "You'd find sleeping in a tent and cooking over an outdoor fire pretty clammy, if not impossible. In a regular camping area you would be able to find some shelter. You'd enjoy it much more and you wouldn't get pneumonia."

"If it rains we can always move into the old mill," I said. "If it keeps up three or four days we can get on our bikes and come back home."

"It's the possibility of an accident that bothers me," said Dad. "Suppose something happened, and you needed help. The mill is some distance from Miss Hankin's house. And after you get to the house there's no telephone. How far is the nearest telephone?"

"I don't know," I admitted.

"That's it," said my father. "It might take an hour to get hold of a doctor or anyone who knew first aid."

"Nothing will happen to us," I protested. "What could happen?"

"You could drown or fall out of a tree," said Dad. "Anything can happen with two active boys like you and your friend Swede. Not that I think it will. You're both good swimmers and you know a certain amount of first aid. In fact, I think an accident is more probable here in town, crossing the street. But here in town someone would rush

out of the nearest house or store, and you would have help in a matter of minutes."

I thought this over for a short time and came up with a good argument. "We go on all-day hikes now," I said. "We aren't near help and we make out all right. We could go up to Miss Hankin's every day and report how we were doing."

"But I wouldn't know," said my mother. "I'd worry about you."

The argument went over a little better with Dad. "This is going to be a busy week," he said finally. "Both your mother and I have a number of things planned, and we couldn't be running out to Burnt Hill everyday. Wait until next week, and you can go. Then someone can drive out every day and make certain that you're all right."

"Who wants his parents coming out every day to check on him when he's camping?" I objected.

"We can time our visits so that you needn't see us," Dad said dryly. "You can report to Miss Hankin, and we'll talk to her. That way you will be spared any advice or objections from us, and we won't have to listen to arguments from you. Which brings me to the observation that I've heard enough arguments for tonight. The matter is settled."

From his tone I knew that I had better retire from the field. I was feeling pretty low when I went to call Swede.

He hadn't had any more success than I had, which made me feel a trifle better.

"I got about the same objections here," he said. "I guess we'll have to go out and investigate the telephone situation. There might be one much nearer than we think."

"We've never explored on the opposite side of the stream from Miss Hankin's place," I said. "That might be just a thin strip of woods along the creek. For all we know some other house might be closer to the mill than hers. Shall we go out tomorrow?"

"Dad is going to New York tomorrow to get some special molding," Swede said. "He says we can go along in the pick-up truck if we want. He's leaving at seven o'clock."

We decided in favor of New York. Dad gave me permission to go without even looking up from his book; I guess he was relieved to get off the subject of camping.

"You'd better set your alarm for six o'clock," Mother said. "And get up promptly. You will have to feed your pigeons, eat breakfast, and be over at the Larsons' in an hour."

I woke up before my alarm went off the next morning. After slipping on some old clothes, I hurried out to feed my pigeons. As usual, I let them out for a flight before I put any feed in their pens. I was watching Albert circling around when suddenly I had a brilliant idea. I filled the

water crocks, tossed in some food, and hurried back to the house.

Mother was at the stove in a housecoat, cooking bacon and eggs, and Dad was sitting down at the table when I came in the door. Both of them were up earlier than usual and were still half asleep.

"I've got it!" I said. "We can take the three pigeons. We can release one on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday. Then when Mr. Wilson goes out to bring Miss Hankin in to church on Sunday he can bring all three back to us. Then we'll have one a day for Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday."

"What are you talking about?" asked Dad sleepily. "And we are not in the next room, so you needn't shout."

"I'm talking about our camping trip at Burnt Hill. We can release a pigeon every day to let you know that we're all right. Okay?"

"You have me at a disadvantage," said Dad. "I haven't had my first cup of coffee, and I can't see any flaw in your scheme. But there must be one, and I'll find it as soon as I'm fully awake."

By the time I had eaten my breakfast he was having his second cup of coffee. "Well, can we do it?" I asked. "The idea's good, isn't it? Eileen will be glad to get the message every day."

"Those pigeons of yours had better be well trained," he said finally. "I don't want your mother calling me frantically and saying your pigeon didn't arrive, only to drive out there and find out that you're all right but the pigeon stopped for a worm."

"They're well trained," I said. "We'll release one every afternoon, and it'll be here about the time you get home from work."

"All right," he said. "You can go."

"Wonderful!" I said. "Now I've got twenty-five dollars that I saved last summer for a camping trip this summer. Remember?"

"Vaguely," he said.

"I can't get to the bank to draw it out because the bank isn't open yet and I have to leave in about three minutes for Swede's place," I said. "How about lending it to me until I can get to the bank? I want to buy some camping equipment in New York today."

"I knew there would be a catch somewhere," he said. He pulled out his billfold and handed me fifteen dollars. "That's all I can spare until I get a check cashed myself. I should get an IOU for this in case the matter should slip your mind."

There wasn't time to tell Mrs. Larson about the plan with the pigeons, but we talked to Mr. Larson on the way to

New York. He didn't have much faith in the reliability of pigeons, but he finally agreed that Swede could go camping with me.

Mr. Larson planned to go to several places while he was in the city. Swede and I left him at a large lumber yard on Canal Street, not too far from the entrance to the Holland Tunnel.

"Here, this is the address," said Mr. Larson, writing it down on a slip of paper. "Here's some money for lunch, and a dollar and a half that you are to spend for no other purpose but a taxi to get you back here in case you can't find your way by subway. I don't care where you go or what you do as long as you stay out of trouble and get back here by four o'clock."

We took the subway down to the Hudson Terminal and began looking through the camping- and sporting-goods stores on Chambers Street and in that general area. The trouble with a store that has everything, as those stores do, is that you have too much trouble making up your mind. It was fun, though, looking at all the special equipment you can get for camping. We didn't buy much. Swede got a hunting knife and a small hatchet that he could wear on his belt, and I got a canteen. We both got rubber mattresses that could be blown up. The overnight hikes that we'd taken had convinced us that sleeping on the hard ground is no fun.

After we had bought our equipment we decided to go up to Times Square and look around. We stopped off at the lumber yard on Canal Street and left our packages and then went on uptown. After wandering around Times Square for a while we walked down Forty-second Street toward the Hudson River. There are a number of lunch counters, movies, and penny arcades along that street, so we moseyed along, enjoying ourselves and wasting time. About three o'clock we felt hungry; all we had eaten for lunch was a couple of hamburgers apiece and some pie à la mode. The popcorn, candy, and other things we'd eaten since hadn't been enough to make up for such a light lunch. Although we didn't have too much time we stopped in a clean-looking restaurant to have a snack. There was a row of booths along one wall, a counter along the other, and dozens of little tables in between. We found an empty booth and sat down.

The waitress said that waffles with honey and bacon wouldn't take too long, so we both ordered some. They were good but not very filling. We were almost finished and were wondering about having seconds when I glanced at the door and saw Clem Auerbach's friend, the one with the little mustache who had been so interested in John Stout Hankin's journal.

"Swede! Look who's standing just inside the door," I said. I whispered, although I don't know why. The man

was too far away to have heard me unless I had shouted.

Swede looked over his shoulder, and I could tell by his face that he recognized the man too. We didn't have a chance to talk about it because the man glanced at the counter and then came threading his way through the tables. He stopped beside our booth and looked up and down. All the booths were taken, so he chose a table almost directly opposite us, not more than fifteen feet away.

He must have had no lunch or was eating an early dinner, because he ordered a full meal—soup, a steak with French fries, vegetables, and a salad.

"I wish I knew his name or where he lived," I mumbled to Swede.

"The only way to find out would be to follow him," said Swede. "We haven't got time. We've got to leave in about ten minutes."

We dawdled with the few bites that were left of our waffles and watched the man. He was in a hurry or else was naturally impatient because he kept looking over toward the kitchen and frowning. The waitress was gone for some time before she came back with his soup.

"I'd like some crackers if you think you could get them before the soup gets cold," he said in a sarcastic voice.

The waitress was the same one who had served us. She was a large, heavy-set woman who was either tired or had got up on the wrong side of the bed. When we had asked

for more butter she had acted as though we had stepped on her pet corn.

"I'll bring some crackers as soon as I can," she said in a surly voice.

He was halfway through the soup by the time the crackers arrived. She slammed them down on the table and started to walk away. "And a glass of water," he said. "That is, if you serve water here."

"There's no extra charge, if that's what you're worried about," she said, glaring at him.

While he was finishing his soup a policeman in uniform came in and sat down a few tables away, his back toward us and toward the man we were watching.

"I wish I could figure out some way of causing that policeman to take a good look at our man," I whispered to Swede.

"Why?" he asked.

"He might recognize him if he's had any sort of criminal record," I said. "Then if he and Auerbach ever did steal anything at Burnt Hill, we'd have some way of tracing him."

"I suppose we could go over and ask the officer to look at him," said Swede. "But we might get mixed up in a lot of questions that would make us look silly. Also we'd be late in meeting Dad."

"And our man would probably get a good look at us," I

added. "The way it is now, he doesn't know we exist, and I'd just as soon keep it that way."

The man finished his soup, and the waitress had still not brought the glass of water that he wanted. He drummed his fingers on the table and then got up and walked toward a telephone booth at the rear of the restaurant.

"I've got it," Swede said. "The trick with the glass of water. It'll work perfectly with these tables."

I knew immediately what he meant. You fill a glass of water up to the very edge. Next you put a piece of paper over the top. You hold your hand on the paper and turn the glass upside down. Then you can take your hand away from the paper, but the paper will stay in place. I've pulled the trick lots of times. First you bet someone a nickel or a dime that you can hold a glassful of water upside down without spilling a drop.

Swede was talking about carrying the trick one step further. After you have the glass of water upside down, you set it down on the table. If the tabletop is made of something smooth like marble or plastic, you can slide the paper out from under the glass. Then there's no way of getting the glass up without spilling the water all over the place. When the water is clear the glass looks empty. I've tried that trick too, but just once. It was in a restaurant at home, and the waitress picked up the glass, thinking it was empty. The water went all over her dress. I made two mistakes—I

stayed to see what happened, and I laughed. She had a pitcher of water in her other hand when it happened, and I got the whole pitcherful down my neck.

I poured what was left of the water in Swede's glass into mine and had just enough. A piece of porous paper such as a napkin won't work, but luckily the menu was still on the table. I tore off a piece about the size we needed and stuffed the rest in my pocket.

"You go pay the checks," I said to Swede. "I'll be right behind you, and we'll get out fast."

I turned the glass of water upside down and then stood up, holding on to the bottom of the glass with my hand. No one was paying any attention, so I walked across to the table Clem's friend was occupying. I set the glass down, yanked out the paper, and picked up his empty glass almost without pausing. On my way out I put the extra glass on a vacant table. By the time Swede got his change I was right behind him.

We walked up the street until we were in front of the next store and then went back and pretended to be looking at the menu that was pasted to the inside of the big plate-glass window.

"They won't be able to figure out what happened or who did it for at least five minutes," said Swede. "I want to see this."

We couldn't have had better luck. Everything went off

like a well-practiced football play. The man came back from the telephone booth and sat down. The waitress arrived right behind him with a tray and a pitcher. She put the tray on the table and arranged the dinner in front of him. Then she picked up the pitcher with one hand and the glass with the other. A flood of water came down over the dinner and into the man's lap. Part of it must have splashed onto her legs, because she jumped back.

He jumped up and shouted something at her. She shouted back, and in two seconds there was a first-class brawl. The policeman turned around and got to his feet, while the manager came hurrying toward the table from somewhere in the rear. I began to laugh, and Swede grabbed my arm.

"Come on," he said. "Let's get out of here before they spot us."

We hurried to the corner and called a taxi. On the way downtown we tried to get all the laughter out of our systems. We figured it wouldn't be too wise to be laughing or talking about the matter on our way home. Adults seem to have no sense of humor when it comes to practical jokes.

10. Captured

Our camping expedition got under way at ten the next morning. We piled all of our camping equipment, our bicycles, and a box with my three pigeons in it in the back of Mr. Larson's pick-up truck. Mrs. Larson drove us out, and my mother went along so that she would know the road.

Miss Hankin was in the yard, pruning a rosebush, when we arrived. She was wearing her usual long black skirt and high shoes and a high-necked pale blue blouse with a lot of lace. I had described her clothes several times at home, but Mother was still surprised.

"Straight out of a fashion plate for nineteen hundred," she whispered to Mrs. Larson as we walked over to meet Miss Hankin.

"I trust that you really don't mind the boys camping down by the mill," said Mother, after we had introduced her and Mrs. Larson.

"I think it's wonderful," said Miss Hankin. "If I had a tent I'd join them."

They talked while we unloaded the truck. We were

about to carry our gear down to the old mill when the three women started toward the house.

"I'm going to show your mothers the house," said Miss Hankin. "You can come along if you care to."

I was going to turn down the invitation, when Swede nudged me. "Maybe we can tell if Auerbach has been inside," he whispered.

We entered the house through the kitchen, the room that Swede and I had seen through the window the night we had visited the farm. First Miss Hankin opened the two doors on the right side of the room. One led into a big storeroom that was half full of firewood. On the other side of the second door were four steps which led downward into a long narrow room that was walled with stone to shoulder height. There were shelves along the walls and one tiny narrow window at the far end. The window was half open, and through it we could see a screen and, outside of that, iron bars.

"It looks like a prison," I said.

"Yes, it does," she agreed. "A dungeon, in fact. It was built below the ground level so that it would be cool. All houses had a room like this, or a cave, where the milk, the meat, and the vegetables were kept. Nowadays people keep such things in the refrigerator—except me, of course. I still use this room for the purpose for which it was built more than two hundred years ago. The bars across the

window were to keep dogs out, I imagine, back when large quantities of meat were kept here. That window is only a few inches above the ground on the outside."

We went back to the kitchen and crossed to a door on the opposite side. "I want to apologize for the rest of the house," said Miss Hankin. "I use only the kitchen, the storeroom, and the cold room. I can't heat the rest of the house or keep it clean. It hasn't been used for years, and I'm afraid everything is covered with dust and dirt."

We were still not prepared for what we saw. There was room after room with peeling paper, falling plaster, and broken windows. She had stuffed rags in some of the broken panes and covered the others with odd pieces of boards. Where there were shades they were drawn, and old blankets and sheets covered the furniture.

The gloom, the musty smell, and the quiet made shivers run up and down my back, and I wouldn't have been surprised to see a ghost step out of a closet at any minute. Cobwebs were everywhere. When you walked into a room they struck you across the face, and dust settled down on your head and shoulders. My mother and Mrs. Larson just glanced inside the rooms, but Swede and I went in every one.

They talked about the beautiful old woodwork and such things as glass bull's eyes in the bedroom doors, but Swede and I didn't pay much attention. We had flashlights in our

camping equipment, and we took them with us. They didn't do us much good, though, because the women went through the house so fast we had little chance to look at things carefully.

There were a dining room, several sitting rooms, a parlor, and a big library on the first floor. The library had bookshelves from the floor to the ceiling on all four walls. Every inch of shelf space was filled with books. The second and third floors were bedrooms with a couple of small sitting rooms. Miss Hankin stopped at the stairs leading to the attic.

"There's a big fireplace at one end of the attic," she said. "When I was a girl the dressmaker used to come here, and we tried on our dresses in front of that fireplace. There's nothing to see in the attic but old trunks, boxes, and books, but if you like, go on up."

The three women stayed downstairs, but Swede and I climbed the steep stairway and pushed open the door. The attic was as big as some houses I've seen. The heavy rafters came down to within two feet of the floor at the eaves, but the center of the attic could have been made into four or five rooms. The place was crammed with trunks, boxes, broken pieces of furniture, old dressmaker's forms, and books. There were bookcases and built-in shelves full of books, boxes of books, and piles of books on the floor.

Everything was covered with a layer of dust that must

have been accumulating for years. The dust was so thick that when we noticed an unexpected square spot of clean floor about midway down the attic we both focused our lights on it and stopped.

"That box has been moved," said Swede, flicking his light at a square box that stood a few feet from the clean spot.

I picked up the box and set it down on the square of clean floor. It fitted exactly. "Someone wanted to get at that chest," I said, pointing at a small brassbound chest that stood back under the eaves.

We moved the box aside again and crouched down in front of the chest. It was a heavy, well-made box, the kind that you'd expect to hold something valuable, like jewels or gold. Swede tried the lid and found it unlocked. We both craned our necks and looked inside. It was filled with musty old clothes.

"There's not much point in pulling them out," I said. "If Clem Auerbach was the one who looked at it, he would have taken anything that was valuable."

"This would have been my choice of all the trunks in the attic as the best bet for a treasure chest," said Steve. "I hope Auerbach was fooled too."

We looked around at some of the other trunks and boxes and saw several streaks in the dust that could have been caused by someone scuffing his feet or moving boxes.

"Are you two lost up there?" Mrs. Larson called.

"Shall we say anything about what we've noticed?" Swede asked as we walked to the stairs.

"Not while our mothers are here," I said. "It might scotch our camping trip. We'll talk it over later and decide if we ought to tell Miss Hankin."

We all went downstairs and outside. Our mothers sat on an old bench under the big maple and talked to Miss Hankin while Swede and I loaded ourselves with part of our gear and started toward the old mill.

We had to make three trips to carry everything to our camping spot. We put our bicycles in the barn in a dark corner where they would not be seen too easily. If Clem Auerbach came nosing around we didn't want to advertise the fact that we were there.

By the time we had the tent up and our things in some sort of order it was well after one o'clock. We didn't bother building a fire but made some sandwiches for lunch. Then we set off on a scouting expedition.

We circled through the trees and very quietly sneaked up on the spot where Auerbach had hidden while watching the house. We watched for some time, but nothing moved and we could see no one. Finally we left the trees where we were hiding and walked over to the clump of bushes. No one was there, and it looked exactly as it had on Monday. There were no more paper bags and no fresh cigarette stubs.

"He hasn't been back," Swede said.

"He probably found what he was looking for last Sunday," I said. "Let's go talk to Miss Hankin."

We started at the very beginning and told Miss Hankin everything that had happened concerning Clem Auerbach. The only thing we did not tell her was that the desk was valuable or that we hoped it would be sold at the Antique Fair the following week. We simply said we had taken it to Auerbach to be refinished.

She listened to our story calmly. Even when we told her about the watcher on the hill and the box that had been moved in the attic, she showed no excitement.

"As near as we can figure out, he must have found what he was after," I said. "I wish we had told you sooner, then you wouldn't have left the house unguarded last Sunday."

"I probably would have," she said, smiling. "I still can't imagine what there could possibly be of any great value around here. I have a few trinkets and some small pieces of jewelry, but they aren't worth much except for sentimental reasons. Anyhow, there's no use feeling disappointed about the matter or worrying about it."

"Was there anything in that trunk?" asked Swede.

"Not a thing other than the clothes you mentioned," said Miss Hankin. "You know, I remember Clem Auerbach vaguely. I saw him once or twice when he was a little boy. He had curly blond hair and was very pretty, I believe."

"He isn't very pretty now," I said.

"More's the pity," she said. "It's a shame how people change as they grow older, both in looks and character. Now who would think that little boy would turn out to be a thief? If he should come back to that spot up on the hill, let me know, will you? I want to talk to him."

"Talk to him!" said Swede.

"Certainly," she said firmly. "I'll tell him, if he wants to look through the house, to come look. I have no objections. Also I'll tell him that if he insists on sneaking around the place I'll be forced to shoot him."

Swede and I looked at each other and thought about the night we had peeked in the window. We were sitting outside under the maple, where Miss Hankin usually sat, and her black dog was beside her. She reached down and patted him and then stooped over to examine his head more closely. "A tick!" she said in annoyance. "You know, that's the one objectionable feature of this part of the country. A long-haired dog is always picking up ticks. I suggest that you two examine yourselves every day, because there are lots of them in the woods near the mill."

She seemed to have forgotten about Clem Auerbach completely. I guess we were much more concerned about the matter than she was. Also I think we were more disappointed than she was at the thought that Auerbach might have stolen something valuable.

We went back to the mill and went swimming for an hour or so. Then we built a fire and roasted some potatoes and grilled some steak for dinner. We opened a can of peaches and a package of cookies for dessert. That evening we loafed around the fire, talking and slapping at mosquitoes.

We had pitched our tent on the grassy plot in front of the mill but the next morning we moved it. The place was swarming with ants. We made a survey and finally decided on a spot in back of the mill and moved everything there. As a result we nearly missed a wonderful treat.

Miss Hankin came down the hill about four-thirty, looking for us. She saw where the grass had been crushed down under our tent and the remains of our campfire, but we were gone. She called, but her voice wasn't very powerful and the sound of the water going over the dam kept us from hearing her. We were lying on a big rock, sunning ourselves after a swim. Swede happened to see her starting back up the hill and ran after her.

"I'm glad I found you," she said. "I was worried for a minute or two."

"Don't worry about us," I said. I was glad to see her but I hoped she wasn't going to start checking on us two or three times a day. It was a long walk for her, and also we'd have to start wearing bathing trunks when we went in swimming.

"Oh, I wasn't worried about your safety," she said. "I was afraid you'd gone and wouldn't enjoy the corn. It's just right for roasting. I brought some for you, but when I couldn't find you I left it on the other side of the mill."

"It's field corn," she said, when I brought the corn around to our camp. "It's early this year. When you get field corn at just the right stage it's much better for roasting than sweet corn in my opinion."

"Just how do you roast corn over an open fire?" asked Swede.

"I don't," she replied. "I bury it in the coals."

It finally ended with her staying and cooking dinner for us. She should have run a school of outdoor cooking. While we were building a fire the way she wanted it, she made biscuits. She peeled some potatoes, added some canned milk and some cheese, and put the mixture in a bean pot, which she buried in the coals. Next she covered the corn, husks and all, with coals and hot ashes. The biscuits went in last, between two pie tins. While she was doing this we caught four fish, which she cleaned in half the time it would take me.

Within fifteen minutes after catching the last fish we were eating fried fish, scalloped potatoes, roast corn, and biscuits. Our plates were even trimmed with watercress which she had gathered at the edge of the millpond. Everything was delicious. Swede and I ate five ears of corn apiece

—and an ear of field corn is much larger than an ear of sweet corn. When the corn was pulled from the ashes the outer husks were shriveled and charred. When all the husks were pulled back, though, the corn was tender and juicy and hot.

"How do you happen to be such an expert at cooking over a campfire?" asked Swede as we sat around the fire after the meal.

"When I was a girl the house was swarming with children," she said. "There was my sister, my brother, and myself the year round, and four cousins came to stay every summer. We were all within four or five years of each other, and we spent half our time fishing, hunting, and cooking meals out of doors. My sister was the real outdoor cook. She used to bake fish, roast pheasants on a spit, and once or twice she barbecued a suckling pig in a pit."

"Sounds wonderful," said Swede. "Where is your sister now?"

"She was killed many years ago," Miss Hankin said. "She was riding and had a bad fall."

We said nothing, but sat there uncomfortably, looking into the fire. "Of all the children who used to have such wonderful times here, I'm the only one left," she said softly. "Of course that is not too surprising, because none of us can live forever, and I was the youngest. The only part that saddens me is that none of the family wanted to stay here

on the farm. My cousins scattered to different parts of the world, and I've long since lost track of most of their families. My brother became a lawyer and went to Chicago. His son went with a large oil company and has lived here and there around the world. He's in South America now. He has a son, a few years older than you, whom I have never seen. When I die, the farm, which has been in the Hankin family for more than a hundred and fifty years, will be sold to someone else, I suppose. I hope whoever gets it will love it and be able to take better care of it than I have."

It was getting dark, so we walked back to the house with Miss Hankin, although she insisted that we needn't. Then we went back to the stream and hid at a spot where we had seen some marks earlier that looked like deer tracks. We were hoping to see some deer come down to drink, but we waited until after ten without seeing anything.

We fished, explored the hills, swam, and loafed Friday and Saturday. The weather was perfect, and we had a wonderful time. It was easy to imagine that we were living back in the days of the Indians because we didn't see a soul except Miss Hankin once when we went to buy some eggs from her. Each day we went up to the clump of bushes on the hill to make certain that no one had been there.

I released a pigeon every day about five o'clock. I sent the two young pigeons the first two days and Albert on Saturday. They must have all gone straight home, because no one

came out to see that we were all right. I was glad to see the last pigeon go, because they couldn't have been too comfortable even though I had them in a good-sized slatted box. I wasn't worried about their forgetting about home because I've read about pigeons that have been kept in a pen at a new place for two years and then went straight to their old home the first time they were freed.

We got up early Sunday morning and went to see Miss Hankin. Mr. Wilson was coming out to take her to church and was to bring my three pigeons back with him. Although he wasn't expected for more than an hour, we decided to pick strawberries and wait for him to arrive. We didn't bother with boxes but just picked the strawberries and stuck them in our mouths. Suddenly we looked up, and there was a small black and white horse in the middle of the cornfield on the other side of the house.

"I imagine it belongs to Mr. Garson," Miss Hankin said when we went to the house to tell her about the horse. "He has a number of horses and ponies. I can't imagine how it came to wander down here, though. He lives a mile up the road and about half a mile to the right."

"Let's see if we can catch him and ride him back home," I suggested.

"I don't know whether you ought to do that," said Miss Hankin. "It may not be broken to ride, or it may be mean. I doubt if either of you are expert riders. He ought to be

chased out of the corn, though. He won't do the corn any good, and enough green corn could kill him."

"If we can't catch him we'll chase him home," Swede said. "We've got nothing else to do."

"If Mr. Wilson arrives before you get back I'll put your pigeon basket just inside the kitchen door, where they'll be safe," she called as we started toward the horse.

We didn't catch the horse and we must have run and walked five miles in chasing him the mile and a half. It was worth it, though, because Mr. Garson was grateful in just the way we wanted him to be. He saddled two horses and let us go for a ride. When we left Mrs. Garson gave us a gallon pail full of fresh buttermilk.

It was almost noon when we got back to Burnt Hill. We hiked across the fields, approaching the house from the back. We went around the end of the house and into the kitchen. My wicker basket with the three pigeons was sitting on the floor just inside the door.

"Let's leave some of the buttermilk for Miss Hankin," Swede suggested.

We looked around and finally found a pitcher in one of the cabinets. Swede was pouring the milk when we heard a door open behind us. We whirled around, and, standing in the doorway leading to the unused part of the house, was the man we had seen at Clem Auerbach's and later in New York. I was holding the lid to the buttermilk pail in my

hand, and when I saw who was standing in the door the lid slipped through my fingers. It hit the floor with a tinny bang and rolled to the middle of the kitchen. He must not have realized that we were there until that lid hit the floor, because he jumped even farther than I did. His right hand darted into his coat pocket like a flash. Then he saw us and seemed a little less scared. He walked over to the door and looked through the glass. I suppose he was looking to see if there was a car or anyone else outside. When he saw nothing he seemed relieved, but he stayed between us and the door.

"Hello, boys," he said with an oily grin.

His right hand was still in his pocket. He fumbled around for a minute and then pulled it out of his coat pocket and put it in his trousers pocket. "Can't seem to find my cigarettes," he said in what I suppose he thought was a friendly voice.

He didn't fool either of us for a minute. His coat looked as if something heavy was in that pocket, and his hand wouldn't have moved that fast if he had been looking for cigarettes. Swede and I both knew that he had a gun. We said nothing but just stared at him like two frightened rabbits.

"Clem!" he bellowed. "Come down here right away!"

11. The Secret Messages

"I came down to get a drink of water to wash some of that dust from my throat and found a couple of visitors," the man said when Clem Auerbach arrived.

"Hello, Mr. Auerbach," I said.

Auerbach was frightened and confused. He licked his lips and blinked his eyes as he tried to think. His eyes darted from Swede to me and then to his friend, as though he hoped one of us would give him an idea.

"Hello, boys," he said finally. He tried to make his voice sound hearty, but instead it squeaked. "We came out to see if Miss Hankin had any antiques to sell. She wasn't here, and the door was open so we came on in."

"She won't mind," I said, trying to sound as if I believed him. "In fact I think she plans to sell some of her extra furniture."

"That's just what I said to Flip here," said Auerbach, with a little more confidence in his voice. "It's quite a trip out here, and I didn't want to go back without seeing what she had."

"We're on a hike and just happened to drop by," I told him. I don't know why I didn't say that we were camping at the mill. I guess I thought the less they knew the better.

"Boy Scout hike?" asked Flip. "Where's the others?"

"There aren't any others," I said and then wished I had bitten off my tongue.

"Do you carry milk with you on hikes?" asked Flip.

"A farmer down the road gave us some buttermilk, and when we came by here we decided to leave some for Miss Hankin," Swede explained.

"Buttermilk," said Auerbach with a false laugh. "That's nice, isn't it? Nothing like good fresh buttermilk."

"Well, I guess we better be going," I said, picking up the pail. "If you see Miss Hankin, tell her we were here."

"Don't rush off," said Auerbach. "Maybe you can help us. Do you know if Miss Hankin has any more desks like the one your mother got from her?"

"I don't know much about what furniture she has," I told him. "I doubt if we can help you much. But I'm sure you're welcome to look around." I edged a little closer to the door, even though that brought me closer to Flip.

"Let's stop all this nonsense," Flip said suddenly in a nasty voice. "You can tell from their faces they don't believe a word of what you're saying, Clem."

"What are we going to do?" asked Clem.

"Well, we can't let them go, that's certain. They'd

hightail it to the police as fast as they could run. We'll have to keep them here. If they're on a hike, as they say, they won't be missed until dinnertime."

"How are we going to keep them?" asked Clem.

"Tie them up, lock them up, do anything to keep them quiet," Flip replied. "We've got a big job combing this house as it is. After we've found what we want we'll decide what to do with them."

"It's just our luck that they would come blundering in," said Auerbach sourly. "Now if we don't find it we won't be able to come back."

"That's just it," said Flip. "We've got to find it today if it's here. Let's put the kids somewhere and get back to work. If the old lady comes back we'll lay low until the man who brings her is gone. Then we'll put her with the kids and keep on through the night if necessary."

"I'll find some rope," said Auerbach. He opened the door to the cold room and looked inside. Then he looked at the lock on the door. "This will do without tying them. They won't be able to get out of here."

Flip walked over to inspect the cold room, while Auerbach kept his eyes on us.

"You'd better go outside and see if those bars are solid," Flip said. "They may be like the rest of the house, about to fall apart."

Auerbach was gone for a minute and then returned to report that the bars would hold a gorilla. Flip motioned for us to go inside, and Clem slammed the door behind us. We heard the key grating in the lock and then footsteps as the two men left the kitchen. Then there was silence.

We sat down on the damp steps and looked at each other. The same question was in both our minds. What would they decide to do with us?

"If it was only Clem Auerbach I wouldn't feel so scared," Swede said. "That Flip looks dangerous. I'll bet anything he's got a gun in that pocket."

"I know one thing," I said. "If I can possibly get out of here I'm not going to worry about what they're hunting for. I'm just going to leave as fast as I can."

We looked around, but escape seemed hopeless. The walls were stone as high as our shoulders, and there were only two openings—the door behind us, and the little window at the other end. In spite of the fact that Auerbach had said the bars were solid, we decided to try them. Swede climbed up on the shelves to investigate. The screen was inside the bars, however.

"I wish the bars were as rusty as the screen," he said. "I could poke my hand through that without any trouble."

"Do it," I said. "We'll get Miss Hankin another one."

He pulled out his scout knife with one hand and ripped

a big hole in the screen. Then he tried one of the bars. "He was right," he reported. "Solid as a rock. I don't see much point in trying to get out here."

He climbed back down, and we sat down on the steps again. At least two hours passed; they seemed like two weeks. The cold room was damp and clammy, which made us feel worse. We couldn't find much to talk about, so we just sat there quietly, wondering why we had ever got involved in such a mess.

About three o'clock we heard footsteps in the kitchen. Then suddenly the door was yanked open, and Auerbach looked in. When he saw us sitting on the steps he closed it again and locked it. We stood up and turned around, looking hopelessly at the door.

"There's a crack at the bottom," Swede said. "Maybe we can see something."

We got down on our stomachs on the steps and tried to peek under the bottom of the door. The crack was only about half an inch wide, and all we could see was the bottom six inches of the kitchen. There were two pairs of shoes in sight, and from their position we guessed that the two men were sitting at the kitchen table.

Although we couldn't see much through the crack, we could hear by putting our ears close to the door.

"This place is like a tomb," said Flip. "I've inhaled enough dust to put me in the hospital."

"That musty smell is as bad as the dust," agreed Auerbach. "That's why I suggested coming out here to eat."

"Do you suppose the water from that pump would be fit to drink?" asked Flip.

Swede nudged me and grinned for the first time since we had been captured. "He still wants water," he said. "I guess he didn't get enough in that restaurant."

"That's a cistern pump—rainwater for washing," Auerbach said. His voice sounded as though he was talking with his mouth full. "You'll have to go outside to the well for drinking water."

"I'll try the buttermilk instead," said Flip.

"That rat!" I whispered to Swede. "He robs the house, locks us in here, and to top it all he drinks our buttermilk."

"I'm about finished in the attic," said Auerbach. "Another two hours or so ought to pretty well cover the house."

"We'd probably be finished now if you'd used any system last Sunday," said Flip irritably. "That going from room to room and looking in this box and that didn't accomplish a thing."

"I was just getting the hang of the house," said Auerbach, his voice sounding annoyed. "I spent an entire week out here watching the place while you were wearing out the seat of your pants in the city. Quit complaining."

"What'll we do with the kids?" asked Flip, apparently

deciding it was wise to change the subject. Both Swede and I moved a little closer to the door.

"I don't know," Auerbach answered. "Take them with us and dump them off some place."

"Just where could we dump them off where they wouldn't be at a telephone in an hour or two?" asked Flip sarcastically. "Of course we could make a special trip of a hundred miles or so to the mountains."

"Well, what's your idea?" asked Auerbach belligerently.

"I'd like to stick them someplace where they'd stay for a day or so," said Flip. "Unless we get rid of them entirely the police will have a full description of us and even your name. I don't like the idea of being chased by the police with only an hour or two's head start."

Clem must have been considering Flip's speech, for he didn't answer for a minute. The cold room suddenly felt colder and clammier when Flip mentioned getting rid of us entirely.

"I've got just the thing," Auerbach said finally. "We'll take them down to the old mill, tie them up, and leave them."

"What old mill?" asked Flip.

"There's an old stone mill a short distance from here," Auerbach replied. "There isn't even a road to it any more, and very few people around here know it exists. We could take the kids there, and there wouldn't be a chance of their

being found, especially at night. In the morning we could give Mrs. Lambert a call, she's the mother of the dark-haired one, and tell her where she could find them."

"And tell the police where we were," said Flip. "Are you crazy? They'd trace that call immediately."

"All right, we'll stick a postcard in the mail in some little burg around here," said Clem. "It won't be delivered before tomorrow noon."

"Why stick your neck out notifying anybody?" asked Flip. "Their parents probably know they came in this direction. They'll beat the woods when the kids don't show up."

"There's a lot of wild country around here," said Auerbach. "They might not find the boys for days. Lots of things can happen in that time. I'm not getting involved in a kidnaping charge for you or anyone else. That would mean the electric chair, and you know it."

"All right," said Flip. "We'll take them to this old mill, and you can write your postcard."

Swede and I heaved a big sigh of relief. We didn't care very much whether Clem wrote the postcard or not as long as they took us to the mill. Someone would investigate the next day when our pigeon didn't appear.

"I hope they don't see our camp on the other side of the mill," Swede whispered. "They might not leave us there for fear someone would show up too soon."

"Well, we know they aren't going to dump us someplace and let us starve," I said. "That's something."

"I'm half starved now," said Swede. "They might at least give us some lunch."

"Well, we haven't got all day," said Flip. We could hear the noise of his chair being pushed away as he stood up. "I'm going back to the library."

"I'll wash these glasses and straighten up," said Auerbach. "There's no use getting the old lady in a turmoil and having her call the cops. They'll be here soon enough when the kids are found."

"Pigeons!" I whispered to Swede. "My pigeons are out there. If I could just get my hands on them."

"Sure, just ask for them," Swede said disgustedly.

I pounded on the door with both fists. "Mr. Auerbach!" I shouted. "Mr. Auerbach!"

The key turned in the lock, and the door opened about six inches. "Keep quiet in there," he said. "If you don't I'll have to tie and gag you."

"We're hungry," I said. "Let us have our lunch."

"What do you think I'm doing?" he asked. "Running a cafeteria?"

"It's right there in that wicker basket," I told him. "Just inside the door."

He closed the door while we held our breath. My pigeon

basket is about the size of a big lunch basket and looks something like one. It's divided into four compartments inside, each one just large enough to hold a pigeon. Inside the big lid there are four little lids so that each pigeon can be released separately.

"Anybody who would go on a ten-mile hike carrying their lunch in a basket instead of in a pack would be crazy," said Swede. "But I hope he doesn't think of that."

"I hope they don't coo or move around," I said.

The door opened suddenly, and Auerbach tossed the basket through the door. "Here you are," he said. "It will probably be quite a while before you get anything else to eat."

Neither of us said a word until we heard him leave the kitchen. "I'll cut a good big hole in the screen so they can get out," Swede said, getting out his knife. "You talk to those pigeons and tell them how important it is that they do their stuff."

While he worked at the window I looked at the three pigeons. They were all fine and anxious to get out of their close quarters.

"Which do you think would be the better plan, let them all go at once, or about fifteen minutes apart?" I asked. "If they all go at once they'll attract attention if anyone happens to be outside when they arrive. If they go one at a time Eileen or my folks may see one if they don't see another."

"I think I like sending them separately," said Swede after he had thought a minute. "What are you going to say in the message?"

"Help, send police to house or old mill," I said.

"We ought to say something about being captured too," Swede said. "And that we think these fellows have guns."

"We have to keep it short," I said. "We won't be able to use a very big piece of paper."

When I said the word paper I felt my heart sink down into my stomach. I felt in my pockets one by one, and what I had suspected was true. I didn't have any paper or any pencil.

"Have you got paper and pencil?" I asked.

Swede looked at me and swallowed as though something were caught in his throat. He acted as if he expected to find snakes in his pockets, he put his hands in them so gingerly. When he had finished neither of us said a word. We sat down on the steps again and looked blankly at the pigeons.

"We could let them all go at once without any message," Swede said finally. "They'd suspect something was wrong if they saw them."

"That's right," I said, feeling a trifle better. "But they wouldn't bring the police. And they might think I'd dropped the basket and released them all by accident."

"It's the only thing we can do," Swede said.

"Okay, but we better wait until about five o'clock," I

said. "There's liable to be no one home now. At five or so Mother will be in the kitchen."

"Suppose Auerbach and Flip finish what they're doing before then," Swede objected.

I threw back the outer lid and pulled all the pins on the inner lids. "We'll have them all set to go. If we hear the men coming we'll release all three."

We took turns lying on the steps with our heads next to the crack. About four-thirty Swede suddenly began rummaging through the crocks and pans on the shelves.

"There ought to be a paper bag here someplace," he said. "She keeps her food in here. Even a refrigerator always has a few paper bags."

"But not very many pencils," I said.

He kept hunting and a few minutes later held up a bag. "A white one too," he said.

"Is there anything to eat in it?" I asked. I didn't see what good paper would do us without a pencil or pen.

"Two lemons." He put the lemons on the shelf and began cutting the paper bag into small oblong pieces. "We can take a sharp stick and make impressions on the paper, if nothing else," he said. "Maybe they'll be able to read it."

"The lemons!" I said. "We'll use the lemons for secret ink. If Eileen gets the message she'll know what to do."

Swede hacked a piece from one of the wooden shelves and sharpened it into a makeshift pen. Then we wrote the

message, printing as small as we could. We used the lemon juice for ink and pressed down hard to leave impressions on the paper. We weren't too hopeful that the impressions could still be read after we had folded the message several times and wrapped it around the pigeon's leg. Everything really depended on the secret ink.

Some people have the idea that a pigeon can deliver a full-sized letter. I guess they think you take a piece of string and tie the message around the pigeon's neck. If you did, the pigeon would probably never get home. Usually messages are sent by one of two methods. One is to wrap a small thin piece of paper around the pigeon's leg and tie it or fasten it with a rubber band. The better way is to tie a little quill to the underside of one of the big tail feathers. The message is rolled up in a tiny cylinder and put in the quill. The quill doesn't interfere quite as much with fast flying as a paper around the leg. I wasn't racing my pigeons, though, so I used the leg method.

Since you can't use a very big piece of paper, messages by pigeon are always short and in very fine print. The Army uses microfilm. Swede and I finally got our message down to eleven words, which still took more paper than we liked. "Help. Send Police. Prisoners in house or old mill. Men dangerous. N & S."

We tore off the corner of the paper so Eileen would know there was a message in secret ink. The paper was thick, and

when it was wrapped around the pigeon's leg it was sort of bulky. Swede had a piece of twine which we used to tie the paper in place.

I climbed up to the window, and Swede handed me the pigeon. "Don't dilly-dally on the way home," I said. I stuck his head through the hole in the screen and let him go. He swooped upward and in a second was out of sight.

We wrote another message, the same as the first, and sent the second pigeon off as soon as he was ready. We saved Albert until last. It was a few minutes after six when he went fluttering out the window.

"He'll get there," I said confidently. "We can depend on Albert."

We sat down on the steps again and waited. I could imagine all sorts of things that could happen to the pigeons. I wasn't so much worried about their being shot or caught by cats. What I was really afraid of, but didn't mention to Swede, was that they wouldn't go into their pens when they got home. Eileen wouldn't be expecting them, and there wouldn't be any feed inside. When they didn't see any feed they might refuse to go in, or go hunting around for something to eat before they went through the trapdoor.

We were sitting quietly on the steps, wondering just what was happening at home, when the door opened behind us. "All right, come on out," Flip ordered.

When we walked into the kitchen we could tell from the

expressions on their faces that they had found what they wanted. Flip had a pleased gloating look on his face, while Clem Auerbach looked as smug as though he had just been told he was honor student for the year.

"We better tie their hands and tie them together with a short piece of rope," Flip said. "I don't want to go chasing after them across the fields, and I'd hate to have to shoot them."

Clem Auerbach found a coil of clothesline with which he proceeded to tie our hands behind our backs. Then he tied a line from Swede's hands to mine.

"Follow me," he ordered. We went out through the kitchen door and turned toward the old mill.

12. The Fight

Clem Auerbach must have learned the countryside well as a boy. Probably he had refreshed his memory during the week that he had been spying on the house, but at any rate he knew the path that Miss Hankin used in going from the house to the mill. It was fortunate for us that he did. First, it is not easy to walk down a steep hill with your hands tied behind your back, and following the path helped somewhat. Also, we approached the mill from the front, and neither of the men saw our camp on the other side. Both Swede and I were worried that they might see it and would decide to take us somewhere else.

They ordered us into the first big room downstairs, and Clem began tying my feet with the extra clothesline that he was carrying. He did a thorough job of it. My hands were already half numb, they were tied so tight, and I knew that my feet soon would be.

"Where's the car from here?" asked Flip, lighting a cigarette.

"Right over the hill in that direction," Auerbach

replied. He walked to the door so I couldn't see where he pointed. "To keep hidden in the trees we'll have to make a circuit around that way. If we wait ten or fifteen minutes it will be dark enough so we can cut across the open fields without worrying."

"Let's wait then," said Flip. "We've been on our feet all day, and I'm not anxious to walk any farther than I have to."

Clem came back to where we were sitting and began tying Swede. "It would probably be just as well," he said. "Then if we meet anyone they won't remember what the car looks like. The minute it gets slightly dark and a car's headlights are turned on, you can't tell what it looks like when you meet it."

"That's right," agreed Flip. "I think the best plan would be to separate once we're well away from here. It's always easier for the cops to locate two people together than two separately."

"Umhuh," agreed Clem, pulling a knot tight.

"It will take a little time to complete the necessary negotiations," said Flip casually. "Since I'm going to have to do the job, I guess I better take our little item. As soon as I have a firm price I'll get in touch with you to see if it's satisfactory."

"Suppose I keep it," said Clem. "When you get an

offer, you get in touch with me and I'll bring it to you."

"There's not much sense in that," said Flip. "You don't know how to go about selling it, and I do. No one is going to pay out any money until they see the article. The only reasonable course is for me to keep it."

"I'll keep it," said Clem shortly. "I've put myself on the spot for this thing. Now that these boys have seen us, I won't be able to stay in Belleville. I can kiss good-by to my business."

"Your business!" said Flip, scornfully. "You don't call that junk shop a business, do you?"

"It's made me a living," said Clem. "And now that I have to leave it I'm going to be sure that I get my share of our find."

"Are you hinting that you think I'd double cross you?" asked Flip softly.

"You might and you might not," said Clem, standing up.

"And what guarantee have I got that you won't double cross me if you keep it?" asked Flip.

"I don't know how to get rid of it," said Clem. "You're safe. So I'll keep it."

"No you won't," said Flip in a hard voice. He pulled something out of his pocket, and although it was getting too dark to see clearly I knew that it was a gun. "We'll step outside, and then you'll hand it over."

Whatever Clem Auerbach's faults were, he wasn't a coward. "Don't pull a gun on me," he roared, and charged toward Flip like a bull.

Flip was too surprised or too scared to shoot. They had been standing about ten feet apart, but in two or three strides Clem had covered the distance. His right shoulder caught Flip in the chest, and at the same time he struck downward with his left arm. He knocked Flip's gun from his hand, and it went sliding across the floor. Flip went backward three or four steps and then caught himself against the stone wall. He pushed with his hands while Clem turned and started toward the gun. Clem was closer to the gun and was stooping over to pick it up when Flip arrived. Flip was not a heavy man but he swung with a haymaker that must have had an awful wallop. It caught Clem square on the jaw. He was bending over, and the blow threw him off balance. He staggered backward four or five steps without standing up, and then he tripped over a piece of rotten wood that was lying on the floor. There was a thud as he hit the stone wall, and then he was quiet.

Flip picked up his gun and pointed it at Clem. "Get up!" he said. "And this time don't try anything."

Clem did not stir. Flip stood looking uncertainly at his fallen companion. I imagine he suspected a trick. After a minute he walked forward slowly, keeping his gun pointed

at Clem's chest. When he was several feet away he paused and craned his neck downward. Finally he squatted down beside Clem. His back was toward Swede and me, and we could not see exactly what he was doing. From his actions I think he was transferring something from Clem's inside coat pocket to his own.

Suddenly he became excited. "Clem!" he shouted. "Clem!"

He picked up Clem's wrist and fumbled with it for a minute and then dropped it. He seemed to be feeling inside Clem's coat again, probably trying to locate the heart. Finally he put his head down close to Clem's face and listened.

When he stood up his face was gray. His eyes darted around the big room wildly, and even in the half-dark I could see panic in his face. He stood in a half-crouch, like an animal about to run.

"It was an accident," he said in a wondering voice. "An accident."

Suddenly his darting glance rested on us, and his voice became shrill and excited. "It was an accident!" he screamed. "You saw it! It was an accident. His head hit the wall. I didn't kill him. It was an accident!"

Neither Swede nor I said anything. We couldn't think of anything to say and would have been too scared to say

it anyhow. We both sat staring at Flip. He walked over until he was directly in front of us, still holding his gun in his hand.

"You saw that it was an accident, didn't you?" he said, almost begging us. "You'll help me, won't you?"

I suppose we would have said "Yes" if we had been able to think quickly enough. But we didn't. We stared at him and at the gun in his trembling hand, without saying a word.

"No, you won't," he said suddenly in a much lower and softer voice. "You'd let me hang, wouldn't you? But you're the only witnesses."

He stood in front of us, weaving back and forth slightly, his eyes shifting from us to Clem Auerbach's body and back again. He was over his first panic, and even in the gathering darkness we could see his expression change as he schemed and thought. We knew what he was planning, and our bodies became as numb as our hands and feet. If we were not alive there would be no one who could say what or who had killed Clem Auerbach. And if Flip could arrange matters properly it would look as though Clem had killed us and then accidentally killed himself.

Several minutes passed as he thought. He became completely calm. He was coldly weighing the risks and the advantages. Would he be in less danger if we lived and could be possible witnesses in his favor if he was ever

caught? Or would he be safer if he actually committed two murders in cold blood but left no witnesses?

I don't know what he would have decided. Probably he never knew himself, because at that minute there was a shout from outside.

"We have the mill surrounded! Anyone inside come out with their hands in the air!"

Flip whirled around like a cornered rat. He hesitated for a second and then ran, panic-stricken, for the stairs. He went up them three at a time and disappeared. A second later we heard the big door at the top of the stairs slam.

"He went upstairs and slammed the door," Swede shouted.

"Be careful!" I added. "He may open the door and shoot!"

There was silence for a minute, and then a state policeman slipped silently through the door. Keeping his eyes on the top of the stairs, he moved over until Flip would have had to open the door and look around the doorjamb to see him.

"All right, upstairs!" he shouted. "You're covered. Come on out." There was no answer, and nothing happened. He shouted several times but got no results. Then I heard my father's voice, asking if he could come in; the policeman said yes, and in a short time Dad had untied us. He told us to stay with him and went back outside. After

taking us some distance from the mill he told us to stay behind two trees. Then he went back to see if he could help the police.

Swede and I wanted to see what was happening, but we were still scared. We lay flat on our stomachs and peeked around the edges of the trees. We expected Flip to surrender or fire from the second-floor windows at any minute, but nothing happened. The policemen kept shouting, but there was no answer. Meanwhile it grew darker and darker.

There were two patrolmen from town and two state policemen, one a sergeant and one a lieutenant. The two patrolmen from town stood at one corner of the building, and the sergeant and my father at the corner diagonally opposite. The lieutenant came over to ask us a few questions and then went back inside the mill. He may have been examining the stairs and the door, or he may have been looking at Auerbach's body. After a few minutes he came out and talked with the sergeant.

"It's going to be too dark to see in a few minutes," he said. "I think we'll be able to hear him hit, though, if he jumps from one of those second-floor windows. If he insists on running for it, we'll have to do some fancy shooting to get him before he disappears in the trees."

"He won't get away," said the sergeant confidently.

"All right, men, if he jumps out a window, start

shooting!" shouted the lieutenant, largely to scare Flip. "Don't move from your positions, and you won't hit each other."

"You'll have to go back to the car," the lieutenant said, turning to the sergeant. "Bring more lights and half a dozen tear-gas bombs. Also the ax."

Long before the sergeant returned it was completely dark. There was no moon, and the sky was overcast, which made the night especially black.

The sergeant returned shortly with four electric hand lanterns. One was placed on each of the four sides of the mill.

"All right, this is your last chance," shouted the lieutenant. "Come out or we'll gas you out!"

There was still no answer, so the lieutenant started throwing. He threw three gas bombs through the windows on the two sides of the mill that we could see, and I imagine he threw some through the windows on the other sides. Everyone stood by, expecting Flip to come stumbling and choking down the stairs, but nothing happened.

"He must be overcome," said the sergeant, "unless he's in an airtight room."

"The storeroom in that far corner hasn't got any windows," Swede said. He crawled over to tell the lieutenant and then came back.

"Well, we'll have to batter down the door," said the lieutenant a few minutes later.

The sergeant and the lieutenant took turns chopping at the door. Dad offered to help and so did the two patrolmen from town, but the state police refused to let them. "This is our responsibility," the lieutenant said. "We'll do it."

Swede and I expected it would take an hour to batter down that thick door, but they had it open in fifteen minutes. They chopped a hole through the planks and then reached inside to slide the big bar back. Again they shouted for Flip to surrender, but by this time none of us really expected him to answer.

The sergeant had brought a gas mask along with the other equipment. He put it on and went inside. He was gone for at least five minutes and then he came outside and took off the mask.

"He's not there," he said, wiping the perspiration from his face. "He's gone."

"He can't be," said the lieutenant.

"I know he can't," agreed the sergeant. "But he is. The place is empty."

"I don't doubt your word," said the lieutenant, "but I want to take a look myself."

A short time later he came outside, shaking his head.

"The place is empty," he said. "I don't know how it can be, but it is."

He kept his men posted outside for almost an hour. By this time they were able to go into the mill without masks, and three went in at once. Finally even Swede and I were allowed inside. Flip had disappeared.

"He went up the stairs, that much is certain," said the lieutenant. "The boys not only saw him, but the bar was across the door to prove it. That had to be placed from the inside. He must have jumped out without our seeing him."

"That's at least a twenty-five-foot drop," said the sergeant. "If he jumped he would have made some mark on the ground."

They went over the ground carefully on all four sides of the mill but found no trace of Flip or marks of any kind.

"How about trapdoors in the floor?" asked one of the patrolmen. "Could he have dropped down inside and then slipped out through one of the windows or openings on the ground floor?"

They went through the mill with their lights but could find nothing. Finally, about twelve o'clock, they quit. Flip had disappeared, and no one knew how.

Both Swede and I were tired and hungry, but somehow we didn't feel like spending the night at our camp behind the mill. We decided to call the whole camping trip off

but to wait until the next day to gather our gear together. We walked back to the house with Dad. Miss Hankin had stayed in town, so we went on down the road to where Dad had left his car when they had first stopped to surround the house.

The next morning the police wanted us to go back to Burnt Hill to go over everything and answer questions. We went out with Mrs. Larson in the pick-up truck. A different state police officer was there, so we went through our adventure step by step. We showed him just where we were sitting and where Flip was standing when the mill was surrounded. We were of no help, however, in solving the mystery.

The police went over every inch of the mill in daylight. They measured all the rooms upstairs and down and then measured the outside walls. There were no secret rooms, no trapdoors, and no secret passageways. Flip had simply vanished. They had no theory except that he had jumped from one of the windows without anyone's seeing or hearing him and without leaving any marks in the soft ground. It was a poor theory, but it was the best there was.

13. The Tree

It's surprising how clearly you can see a person in your mind and yet how difficult it is to describe him so someone else would recognize him. I doubt if Swede and I will ever forget how Flip looked, especially after his fight with Clem Auerbach. But when we tried to describe him the next day he sounded like any one of a hundred men you might meet on the street.

"About five feet nine, weight about one-sixty-five, age thirty-five to forty, dark-complexioned, dark hair, small dark mustache, brown eyes, heavy brows, long rather thin nose," said the lieutenant who was writing down the details. "Can't you think of any distinguishing details, such as scars, moles, or missing teeth?"

"He wore a ring on his right hand," said Swede. "A gold ring with a red stone. Neither of us got close enough to see anything like a mole or a scar."

"It's next to impossible to pick a man up without his name or a picture unless he has some outstanding feature such as a huge scar, a limp, or a missing finger," said the

lieutenant thoughtfully. "I wish we knew what he and Auerbach stole. We might locate him when he tries to dispose of it."

"I think we can get you another description of him," I said. "From a policeman in New York."

"What!" said the lieutenant.

"We thought something might happen and we'd need to know who he was," Swede said. "So one day when we saw him in New York we arranged it so a policeman there would notice him."

We told the lieutenant the story of the glass of water in the café. He wasn't as prejudiced about practical jokes as most adults, and he laughed almost as much as we had that day.

"That's wonderful," he said. "That may very well turn out to be the break we need to find him. I hope you two don't become suspicious of too many people, though. I can see how your victims might object. Now where was this restaurant located?"

"The south side of Forty-second Street," said Swede promptly. "Somewhere in that first block west of Broadway."

"It will probably take a few days, but they'll find the patrolman we want," said the lieutenant.

Swede and I had slept late the morning after our rescue and then had gone immediately to Burnt Hill on arising.

It wasn't until late Monday afternoon that we had a chance to talk to Eileen and get the details regarding the pigeons. She had been visiting a friend down the block when the first bird arrived, and no one saw it. The second one arrived just as she was turning into our sidewalk, so she went straight to the loft instead of into the house.

She had known immediately that the messages were in secret ink. However, she couldn't find the cord to the old electric iron that we used, and she finally went into the house and used the electric toaster. By the time she had made the messages visible she saw Albert coming home like a bullet. All three pigeons had gone into their pens immediately, which made me feel proud.

I think my father might have suspected some kind of a joke if he hadn't seen the secret compartment in the desk and known my story about Clem Auerbach. As it was, he considered going to Burnt Hill by himself to investigate, but he finally decided to ask the police to go with him.

Miss Hankin had been at the Wilsons' when Eileen received the messages. My mother had called Mrs. Wilson, so Miss Hankin had stayed in town all night. She went back to Burnt Hill with us Monday morning, however, completely undisturbed by what had happened.

"The boys say the men found what they were looking for," she said. "In that case this Flip has no reason to come

back, and I'll be perfectly safe there, just as I have always been. I would like to know what it was they found that was so valuable, though."

Swede and I loafed for the next few days. We were busy telling our story to anyone who would listen and being heroes to our friends. Also, we had to appear at the inquest for Clem Auerbach. I don't remember the exact words of the verdict, but it was something to the effect that he had been killed by a person or persons unknown.

Thursday night the Antique Fair started. Ordinarily neither one of us would have considered going to an affair like that, but we decided to drop by and see our desk. It was easily the best looking piece of furniture at the fair, but even so we couldn't imagine anyone paying eight hundred dollars—the price at which it was being offered—for it. In fact we couldn't understand any of the prices at the Antique Fair except those they were charging at the refreshment counter.

The desk was sold on Friday. After deducting the donation to the church and the cost of refinishing, there was $677.50 left for Miss Hankin. Mother, Mrs. Larson, and Mrs. Wilson insisted on making a big affair out of taking the money to Miss Hankin. Swede and I didn't care if they wanted to make a social affair out of it, but we objected to their wanting us to get dressed in good clothes to go along. We didn't want to go at all because we knew there would

be a lot of talking and thanking and nonsense of that sort; and as far as putting on anything but T-shirts and blue jeans was concerned, that was ridiculous if you were going to Burnt Hill. We wore T-shirts and blue jeans, but we couldn't get out of going.

"I wouldn't dream of taking the money," said Miss Hankin when she was told. "I gave the desk to the boys, and if it turned out to be valuable I'm very glad for their sakes."

"They didn't want the desk at first, you know," said Mother. "Then they happened to think of the Antique Fair and thought perhaps they could sell it there. Isn't that so, Neil?"

That wasn't exactly the truth, but I agreed.

"At most they thought they might get twenty dollars or so and then buy a second-hand business desk," said Mrs. Larson. "They can buy a desk for twenty-five dollars that would suit them much better."

"Then I'll give them twenty-five dollars apiece," said Miss Hankin. "They can both buy desks."

There was considerable argument back and forth, but that was the way matters were finally settled. Swede and I each took twenty-five dollars, and Miss Hankin took the rest. The women sat outside for some time and talked, but Swede and I asked if we could explore the house. We thought we might be able to discover what Flip and Clem

Auerbach had found, even though the police had looked through the house without success.

"Clem Auerbach had it in his pocket," said Swede, "So he must have been the one who found it. He was hunting in the attic."

We prowled around in the attic but we found nothing that gave us a clue. We did run across several swords and an old dueling pistol that was interesting, but when we left we were just as much in the dark as before.

The following Tuesday, Lieutenant Hubbard of the state police called and asked us to come out to the barracks. The barracks were about a half-mile outside of town on the highway, so we rode out on our bicycles.

"I think we're getting someplace," Lieutenant Hubbard told us. "The policeman in the café was a Sergeant O'Rourke, and he remembered the incident very well. Fortunately he has an excellent memory for faces. On the theory that the man might have some sort of police record, he went through the files. This is what he came up with."

He handed us a picture of a man's head and shoulders. The man was much younger than the Flip we knew and he had no mustache, but it was unmistakably Flip.

"That's the man!" Swede and I both said.

"You're certain?" asked Hubbard.

"Positive."

"Good!" he said. "You might be interested to hear his record." He picked up the report on his desk and began reading.

"'Herbert H. DeVoe, alias Herbert Miller, alias Henry Johnson. Born in St. Louis, Missouri, year uncertain. Age, approximately 35'—that was about five years ago—'weight, 162, height, five feet eight and a half.' There are a few other details here about birthmarks and so on that I'll skip. 'Arrested for burglary in 1939 but charge dismissed for lack of evidence. Sentenced to three months in jail for violation of the Sullivan Act'— that's a law against carrying a gun without a permit. 'Charged with embezzlement in 1941. Charge dropped because of lack of evidence. Arrested in 1942 for extortion and sentenced to two years in prison. Paroled after one year and six months.

"'DeVoe is a well-dressed, seemingly well-educated, clever man. He has worked at a variety of jobs. Was with Horgan's Mammoth Circus for several years as a trapeze artist. Left the circus under suspicion of having stolen money from several other performers. Worked for Acme Auction Galleries for two years as a clerk and recorder of sales. Reputed to have fair knowledge of painting, statuary, old china and glass, and other valuable objects of art and decoration. Worked for several years in a bookstore as a clerk. Known to frequent race tracks and has a large

acquaintance in the underworld. Is known as Flip-Flop to most of his cronies because of his former association with the circus.' "

"Flip is what Clem Auerbach called him," said Swede.

"Now that we know whom we're after we may get some results," said the lieutenant.

"Maybe they stole a valuable painting," I said to Swede when we were talking about Flip later that morning. "He knew about the value of things like that."

"It would have to have been an awfully small painting," Swede said. "Auerbach had it in his pocket. I still vote for jewelry or something like that. Miss Hankin might not have thought it was worth anything, but then she didn't know the desk was valuable either. Flip Devoe would know."

"There's still the mystery of how he knew there was anything of value in the house, from reading that journal," I said. "I don't remember a thing about paintings, jewels, or any objects of art."

"A trapeze artist!" said Swede suddenly. "That's how he did it. There must be a tree close enough."

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"Flip jumped out of a window at the mill and grabbed a tree branch," said Swede. "I don't remember any big trees close enough for an average man to do that, but a trapeze artist could make a leap that would seem impossible to us."

We had nothing to do that afternoon and, having just eaten our lunch, we hopped on our bikes and went out to Burnt Hill. Miss Hankin wasn't in sight, so we parked our bikes and hurried to the mill. We walked around the building, looking up at the trees. Finally, on the side toward the millpond, we saw the only tree Flip could have used. There was a stout branch a few feet below one of the second-floor windows and about twenty feet away.

"Do you think he could have made that?" I asked.

"He must have," said Swede, who is not bad on a trapeze himself. "You can jump quite a distance if you go downward at the same time. We were all watching the ground, and he simply jumped through the air. It was pretty dark at the time, and he could have done it easily without being seen."

"Yes, but after he's in the tree, then what?" I asked. "This is just a narrow strip between the mill and the pond. If he'd dropped to the ground from the tree someone would have seen him."

It took a few minutes, but we figured out how he had escaped. He must have climbed higher in the tree and then leaped to the next one. That would have been no easy leap either, but Flip had been desperate and he was an expert. From the second tree he could have dropped directly into the water.

"He probably looked at everything carefully while there

was still light," Swede said. "Then, when it was dark enough to take the chance, he made the jump. We know he left before they threw in the tear-gas bombs."

"I suppose any splash he made would have been lost in the noise of the water going over the dam," I said. "He swam until he was well away and then hiked to his car."

We were convinced that we had solved the mystery of his escape. We went back up to the house, to find Miss Hankin sitting outside, waiting for us.

"I took a little nap, so I missed you when you came in," she said. "I saw your bicycles and knew you must be at the mill."

"We have some exciting news," I announced.

"So have I," she said. "You tell yours first."

We told her our solution to Flip's escape. She listened carefully, but we could tell that she was much more excited about her own news.

"I think you were both very smart to figure that out," she said. "Now I want to tell you about my letter. Do you remember I told you once that my brother's son was in the foreign department of an oil company, and that he had a son?"

"Yes," Swede answered.

"Well, that son—that would be my grandnephew—is coming back to the United States to go to college. What's more, he's going to Cornell to study agriculture."

"That's nice," I said, feeling that was a safe thing to say. I couldn't quite understand why she was so excited because some distant relative whom she had never seen was going to Cornell. Still, since she had no relatives to speak of, I suppose that any news about them was exciting.

"I have a letter from John Stout Hankin—he was named after his great-great-grandfather," she said. "It arrived this morning. He wants to come see me sometime soon after he arrives this fall. He says he heard so much about the farm from his grandfather when he was just a little boy."

"Maybe he'll get here during hunting season," Swede said. "That would be nice."

"Yes, it would," said Miss Hankin excitedly. "It will be nice whenever he arrives. I hope he likes the farm."

"I think he will," I said. I figured he would if he liked woods and fishing and hunting. If he expected anything fancy, though, he was in for a disappointment.

"I have an idea," she said. "It is just a dream, but it might work. If he is studying agriculture he will probably want to farm for a while, even if he goes on and becomes some kind of a specialist. This is a fertile farm, and it's still a good-sized one. If he liked it he might want to come here and farm it when he finishes school."

"That's possible," agreed Swede. "A lot of people are going to college to become farmers these days. My dad says the farming business has changed a lot since he was a boy.

Then everyone figured that you starved on a farm. Now you drive a Cadillac if you're a good farmer."

"I'd like to fix things somehow so the place didn't look so terribly run down," said Miss Hankin. "I've watched the buildings slowly falling to pieces, and it hasn't bothered me, because I see the farm as it once was. But I wish that it wouldn't look so overgrown and dilapidated the first time he sees the place. He might be so discouraged he'd never really consider farming it. So I've decided to use the money to sort of spruce things up."

The place certainly needed a lot of sprucing up, but neither Swede nor I said anything.

"Your father is a builder, isn't he?" asked Miss Hankin.

"Yes," Swede answered.

"Well, I wonder if you would ask him to give you some sort of an idea how much it would cost to fix the windows in the house, repair the roof gutters, install electricity, and put in a bathroom."

Swede looked at me and squirmed uncomfortably. "I've worked quite a bit with my father, Miss Hankin," he said. "And I have some idea what things cost. You haven't nearly enough from that desk to do what you want. You wouldn't get more than well started."

"That's what I was afraid of," said Miss Hankin. "I know that building costs have increased tremendously since I was a girl."

"You could probably get the windows fixed, the gutters and roof fixed, and a few minor repairs for what you got for the desk. To do the other would cost you several thousand dollars more."

"Well, then, I'll ask Neil a favor," said Miss Hankin, not in the least discouraged. "Would you ask that gentleman who told you that the desk was valuable to come out to see me? Perhaps I have some other furniture that I can sell. If necessary I'll sell it all. I want this farm to look attractive when John comes to see me."

14. The Book

Swede and I went to see Mr. McVaugh the next morning. I was doubtful about his wanting to go out to Burnt Hill, he was so independent about his time. We carefully explained why Miss Hankin wanted to sell whatever she could, but he didn't seem interested or particularly sympathetic.

"There's a lot of furniture there," Swede said persuasively. "Almost as much furniture as books."

"Books?" asked McVaugh, sitting up.

"Hundreds and hundreds of them," I said.

"Why didn't you say so?" he asked. "Then all this palaver and persuasion would have been unnecessary."

"I thought the furniture was probably worth much more than the books," I said. "I'm always seeing old books at a dime apiece."

"Unfortunately that's true," said McVaugh. "Ninety-nine out of a hundred used books are worth less than a dime apiece. But there are some that are worth a trifle more and many that are much more interesting than any piece of furniture ever was. Don't misunderstand me—I like old

furniture, and buying and selling antiques has made it possible for me to stay in the book business. You see, people will buy an old trivet or a teapot or a cobbler's bench and put it in their living room. They prate about it to every visitor who comes to the house and claim that they're interested in Americana. But they wouldn't dream of buying a book of the same period at one-tenth the price. But I suppose that leaves more books for those of us who do like them."

"You'll go out, then?" I asked.

"Tomorrow morning, if you two will go along to show me the way and introduce me."

We spent almost the entire next day at Burnt Hill. Mr. McVaugh appraised the furniture in less than an hour. His report was not too encouraging.

"Most of it is Civil War or later," he told Miss Hankin. "Evidently someone in your family got tired of most of their old furniture about then. They probably threw away or gave away the old pieces that seemed shoddy and worn out to them and replaced them with new shiny furniture. Today we consider those really early pieces valuable. What they bought to replace them is junk."

"It's an odd world, isn't it?" said Miss Hankin with a smile. We could tell that she was disappointed, though. "Is there anything worth selling?"

"There's nothing that is worth as much as the desk was," he told her. "I would say that several pieces are worth

selling, and also some china and glass. Maybe fifteen hundred dollars in all. Perhaps you'd like to have another dealer check my estimate."

"No, I'll take your word for it," said Miss Hankin. "Well, fifteen hundred dollars is still quite a bit, and I'll do as much to the place as I can with that."

Mr. McVaugh spent three or four hours looking at the books while Swede and I went swimming at the millpond. About four o'clock we went back to the house and found that he had in his car forty or fifty books which he had bought for a hundred dollars from Miss Hankin.

"How are you doing on your history paper?" he asked on our way back to town.

"I've about finished with my notes," I said. "When you drop us off at the house I'll give you the journal if you still want to read it."

The next morning Mr. McVaugh called on the telephone. "Get your detective partner and come down to see me if you're not busy," he said. "I have a theory."

I located Swede, and we went down to Mr. McVaugh's shop. He was sitting in back at his desk, with his nose practically rubbing the ink off the pages of the journal.

"I've been reading the journal," he said. "It's very interesting. There's a lot of unusual material in it. Also the book is interesting because of what isn't in it."

"What do you mean?" asked Swede.

"Two pages have been cut out of it," he said.

He opened the book and turned to a section near the back. John Stout Hankin had stopped his journal some pages earlier, and that part of the book was blank. By spreading the pages apart and looking very close to the binding we could see that two pages had been neatly cut from the book.

"I examined those under the magnifying glass," said Mr. McVaugh. "If we took this to an expert he could probably tell us if the cut was fresh or not. I think it is."

"Then you think Clem Auerbach or Flip cut the pages?" asked Swede.

"Probably," said Mr. McVaugh. "The cut is neat and must have been done carefully with a razor blade or something very sharp. I doubt if the owner of the book would have been that careful if he'd wanted to rip out two pages. After all, it was his book. He didn't keep the journal too fastidiously; there are all sorts of scrawls and figures here and there."

"Why would they take two pages and not the whole book?" I asked.

"Put yourself in their place," said Mr. McVaugh. "They find two pages that contain some interesting and perhaps valuable information. They can't be certain that no one knew the book was in the desk. But if anyone did know, he couldn't have considered the book too valuable or

important or he would have removed it. So they cut out the two pages and replace the book. Then if anyone found it, as you did, the chances were the missing pages wouldn't be noticed."

"I see," I said. "What do you think was on the two pages?"

"Something about books," said Mr. McVaugh.

"Books?" I asked.

"That's right," he replied. "First, the Hankins in general, and John Stout Hankin in particular, were interested in books. You'll notice as you read the journal that he read a great deal. He mentions buying a number of books. Perhaps the two pages contained a list of the books he had bought or read during the year. It's possible that one of those listed was very valuable. Also, you say that, whatever the item was, it was in Clem Auerbach's inside coat pocket. A small book or even an ordinary-sized book would meet that qualification."

"But what kind of a book could be worth all the risk and trouble?" Swede asked. "You said yourself that most old books were worth a dime. Suppose it was worth a hundred dollars, they still wouldn't take a chance for that."

"A copy of the Bay Psalm Book sold recently for a hundred and fifty thousand dollars," said Mr. McVaugh. "A small, yellowed little book of Psalms. But it is the first book printed in America. There are many books that are worth

anything from a thousand dollars to twenty-five thousand dollars. Occasionally you read about them in the papers—too often in fact, because then everyone with an old book in their attic thinks they have a treasure. Nine hundred and ninety-nine times out of a thousand they have a book worth nothing. Miss Hankin may have been the thousandth case."

"Flip DeVoe worked for several years in a bookstore," Swede said.

"Also he worked in an auction gallery in New York," I added. "Where they sold paintings, china, and things like that."

"That's more support for my theory," said Mr. McVaugh, who seemed to enjoy playing detective. "Many of the valuable books are sold at auction. He would have every opportunity to get at least a smattering of knowledge about values. When you first saw him he was sitting in Clem Auerbach's, thumbing through the journal. Then he saw something that interested him. He made some notes, probably something about the title and description of the book.

"I would say that at first they were merely interested and hopeful. A valuable book was mentioned in a journal that was a hundred years old. However, the desk and the journal were still in existence, and it was possible that the book might be too. It was worth investigating. Next Clem Auerbach learned from your mother that the desk came from Burnt Hill. Clem once lived in that locality and knew that

the Hankins lived there. Since the journal was signed by John Stout Hankin, he probably concluded that Pine Hill Farm was the same as Burnt Hill. Perhaps he knew the story of why the name was changed.

"Undoubtedly he knew something about Miss Hankin. She is an elderly woman who lives all alone in a very old house. She likes to keep everything as it was years ago. There was a strong probability that the book was still somewhere in the house and that she either did not know it existed or had no idea of its value. So he watched the house for a week and learned that she had very few visitors but that she went to church on Sunday and stayed away all day.

"The situation looked promising. The house was left unlocked, and it was simple for them to sneak in and hunt while she was gone each Sunday. Suppose the book was worth anywhere from two to ten thousand dollars. If they had to hunt for several Sundays their time would be well spent if they found it. She would never know anything was missing. Then you blundered into the house while they were there and ruined all their plans."

"Even then they might not have been in trouble if Flip hadn't pulled out that gun," said Swede.

"That's right," agreed Mr. McVaugh. "Clem Auerbach, dumb as he was, was much smarter than his friend. He probably could have gotten away with that preposterous story about wanting to look at her furniture. In fact, their

biggest error was thinking in terms of stealth and robbery at all. If they had gone to Miss Hankin openly and asked to look through the house she probably would have let them. After all, she asked me to come out there."

"She told us to tell Clem Auerbach he could look through the house," I said, recalling what she had said when we first mentioned our suspicions.

"Exactly," said Mr. McVaugh triumphantly. "If they had found the book she might very well have given it to them. She hadn't the slightest idea of the value of the books I got yesterday. She simply took my word for it."

"I think you've solved the mystery," I said. "But it doesn't do much good now. Whatever the book was, it's gone."

"It does this much good," said Mr. McVaugh. "We can tell the police our theory. A very valuable book excites considerable comment when it appears. Usually such items are sold in New York. The police can notify book dealers and auction markets to be on the lookout for anyone resembling this Flip DeVoe who might offer a valuable book for sale."

We went with Mr. McVaugh to the police, and he explained his theory. They were very interested and promised to notify rare book dealers as he suggested. Afterward we went back to the shop to get a photostat of the map that Mr. McVaugh had promised me. We stayed until lunch, listening to stories about valuable books and looking at some of

Mr. McVaugh's collection. Some of the books dated back to 1650.

That afternoon we went fishing in Stony Creek, about two miles from town. We sat on the bank, loafing in the warm sun and talking about Flip and Clem Auerbach and books.

"Did you notice what good shape some of McVaugh's books were in?" Swede asked. "Why, after one year at school my books are all beaten up and are practically wrecks. Some of those books of his are three hundred years old and are in much better condition."

"Whoever had them must not have read them much," I said. "You'd think that in three hundred years they'd get torn apart, thrown away, or wet, or something."

We looked at each other, the same idea occurring to us at once.

"If he dropped from the limb of that tree into the millpond and swam away—" said Swede.

"The book would be ruined," I said, finishing the sentence.

"All his trouble would be for nothing," Swede said.

"I wonder just how excited he was. If he wasn't so anxious to get away that he didn't care what happened to the book, he'd try to save it."

"The chances are that he wouldn't have had anything waterproof to wrap it in," Swede observed thoughtfully.

"The only other way to save it would be to hide it in the mill."

"Let's go," I said. "There's a chance he may be too scared to come back for it for several months. It might be there."

We hid our fishing rods, so that we wouldn't be bothered with them, and jumped on our bikes. In spite of the rough roads and the hills, we didn't rest once on the way to Burnt Hill. When we arrived we said nothing to Miss Hankin about the book but told her that we were going down to the millpond to take a swim. If the book wasn't there we didn't want to disappoint her.

Swede and I had not been inside the mill since the day of our rescue. We had gone swimming in the pond the day before, when we came out with Mr. McVaugh, but we had not gone near the building, although we would have said that the last place in the world that Flip might want to visit was the mill. Now we were not so certain. One man had been killed in the mill over whatever we were hunting. We didn't feel too brave as we walked toward the door, and we talked about getting the police to go with us. The possibility of finding the book by ourselves was too tempting, however. We would really be heroes.

"I doubt if he'd come back in broad daylight," I said as we hesitated near the door.

"Probably not," agreed Swede. "He'd run much less risk

coming back at night. Besides, he may have been back already."

"Let's go in," I said.

We walked through the first room quickly and climbed the stairs without looking at the spot where Clem Auerbach had been killed. Although it was bright and sunny outside, the mill was cool and much too gloomy to suit either of us. The big door at the top of the stairs stood open, in the middle of it a huge gaping hole which the police had chopped the night Clem had been killed. We hurried through the doorway and looked around.

There were not many places a book could be hidden. Most of the second floor had been plastered, and the only hiding places in the finished rooms were in two chimney-holes and in the closets. We looked in these places without success. Next we went into the storeroom. Since it had no windows, there was no light except that which came through the doorway from the adjoining room. Although the other rooms had finished ceilings, the storeroom went all the way to the rafters. Huge beams ran across where the ceiling would have been had it ever been built. The storeroom was a large corner room, and the upper parts of the two inside walls opened into the loft or attic space above the other rooms.

"I'd feel safer with the key in my pocket," said Swede, taking the ponderous key from the nail beside the door.

We walked in slowly. The gloom, the dampness, and that peculiar smell that you always find in old buildings, made us feel even uneasier than we had felt before. We half whispered when we spoke, and kept looking around apprehensively.

The room was empty, as were all the others. There was little searching to be done. By looking around we could see that there was no book in sight.

"What would you do if you had a book you wanted to hide fast?" Swede asked.

"I'd give it a toss and let it land in the attic someplace."

"The police were up in the attic when they were looking for him that night," Swede reminded me. "Also the next day when they were trying to figure out how he escaped. Of course they weren't looking for books and might not have noticed one."

"If it was a valuable book and an old one that might be damaged, I don't know if I'd want to toss it around, anyhow," I said. "Maybe I'd lay it up on one of those beams if I could get up there. If it wasn't too big it wouldn't show from beneath."

Swede jumped in the air, and his hand was about a foot short of the beam. "It's no harder to reach that than to climb up to the attic," he said. "Either one would be hard to do, but he was a trapeze artist. He could probably jump up and grab the beams. Give me a boost."

He climbed up on my back and sat on my shoulders. Even then he wasn't high enough. Finally I stood against the wall to steady myself, and he stood up on my shoulders. This time he made it and got astride one of the big beams. He lighted a match and looked around while I opened the door even wider to let in more light. He could not stand erect, but by stooping and hanging onto the roof rafters he was able to step from beam to beam. The beams were about six inches square, which made walking comparatively easy. He walked carefully up and down, lighting matches to peer back under the eaves. Suddenly he gave a triumphant shout.

"Got it!" he said happily. "Or at least I see something that looks like a book!"

He stretched out on his stomach on a beam and reached back under the eaves. He held up a small book and said "Catch!"

I held up my hands, and he tossed me the book. A minute later he dropped down beside me and began brushing the dust from his clothes. My fingers were itching with excitement, but I waited until he was ready. Together we walked out into the other room, where the light was better, and examined our find.

The book was small, perhaps five inches by eight, and it had a plain black binding with a leather strip along the back and leather corners. There was no title whatsoever—

just the figures 1748-1757. I opened the cover, and on the flyleaf was a bookplate and beneath it, written in faded brown ink, were the words "From B. Franklin, June 1772. G. Washington."

"George Washington!" I said slowly. "This must have been his book!"

"Just think," Swede said. "He actually wrote those words himself, years and years ago."

I turned the page and found a second flyleaf with writing on it.

To my friend G. Washington:

I found these ten copies of the Almanack, which for reasons I have since forgotten, I once had bound together. Recalling your request, I am sending them to you. I trust they will interest and amuse you.

Your affectionate friend,
B. Franklin

"A gift from Benjamin Franklin," said Swede. "Keep on turning. Maybe everyone who signed the Declaration of Independence will have written in it."

We leafed through the book but found no more writing. As Benjamin Franklin had said, the book was a collection of almanacs, each thirty or forty pages long, bound together to make a book. The pages were old and yellowed but in good condition. I stopped at the title page of the second almanac, and together we read the title.

Poor Richard Improved:
Being an
ALMANACK
and
EPHEMERIS
of the
Motions of the Sun and Moon
The True
Places and Aspects of the Planets;
The
Rising and the Setting of the Sun
and the
Rising, Setting, and Southing of the Moon
for the
Year of our LORD 1749

There was some fine print at the bottom of the page, but we didn't have a chance to read it. Someone was climbing the stairs! The footsteps were slow and cautious but they were unmistakably footsteps. We were trapped. To get out of the mill we had to go into the hall and from it into the room at the head of the stairs. We looked at each other in fright. Flip was coming back after the book!

We looked around and scurried for the closet without a word. It was a long narrow closet with a door in the middle. Swede tried to disappear in one end, and I did the same in the other. We made no attempt to close the door because

we were afraid it would squeak like most of the other doors.

The footsteps come slowly down the hall. Whoever was coming seemed to be pausing at the door of each room to glance inside—probably to make certain that the room was empty. Finally he paused at the door to the room where we were hiding. Then he crossed the corner of the room to the storeroom and stepped inside.

If the man was Flip we knew that he would waste no time looking for the book. When he found it gone he might leave as quickly as he could or he might hunt around. If he left immediately we would be safe, but Flip would be too.

Swede reached in his pocket and held up the big key to the storeroom door. His hand was shaking, but he looked at me and raised his eyebrows. I knew what he meant. I was just as scared as he was but I nodded and motioned with my hands that I would push the door closed.

We waited for a few seconds and then we felt a slight vibration as though someone had jumped. I slipped out of the closet, with Swede close behind me. Without trying to look inside, I slammed the big door to the storeroom. Swede had the key in the lock the instant it closed, twisting with all his might. The lock was stiff, as it had been on that first day when we explored the mill, but it turned. We didn't wait to learn what might be happening inside. Swede yanked the key out, and we raced toward the stairs. We went down them four at a time and streaked for the trees.

15. The Capture

When we got part way up the hill we paused for breath and looked back. We could see nothing but the old mill standing there as solidly and quietly as always.

"Is there any way he can possibly get out?" I asked.

"I don't think so," said Swede. "There's heavy sheathing under that slate roof, so I don't think he could break through. The attic or the space above the plastered rooms seemed to be floored over, although I couldn't see back in the corners where it was completely dark. Possibly he could tear up those floorboards and break through the lath and plaster into the rooms below. Judging from the way the rest of the mill is made, though, I doubt if he would be able to do it without a hammer or some sort of tool."

"We've got to get the police," I said. "But I suppose one of us had better hide around somewhere and watch."

We tossed a coin, and I was elected to go for the police.

"I'll be over there in that clump of bushes," said Swede. "If he gets out I'm not even going to try to follow him. I've been brave enough for one day."

I ran all the way to the house. Miss Hankin was in the kitchen, so I stuck my head in the door and told her that we had Flip DeVoe locked in the mill storeroom and that Swede was watching.

"I think I'd stay inside," I told her. "If he gets out he may come this way. And he's dangerous!"

While we were camping we had located the nearest telephone, which was about half a mile down the road. I jumped on my bike and rode there as fast as I could. Lieutenant Hubbard was not on duty at the police barracks, but the man who answered the telephone said that two policemen would be there in fifteen minutes. I had hoped that the farmer from whose house I had telephoned would go back with me, but only his wife was at home. I got on my bicycle and rode back to Burnt Hill. The officer who had received my call had told me to wait there to show the police the way to the mill. I had supposed that every officer at the Belleville barracks had been out to the mill at one time or another during the investigation of Clem Auerbach's death, but I was wrong.

Miss Hankin was nowhere in sight when I returned. Thinking that she might be in the house someplace, I called from the yard and then from the kitchen door. There was no answer. I was wondering what to do when a state police car came tearing down the road and turned into the lane. Two policemen whom I had not seen before jumped out.

When we got halfway down the path I cupped my hands toward the clump of bushes where Swede had said he would be hiding and called, "Come on out, Swede, the police are here."

"Come on down here," a voice replied from farther down the path. "He's still inside as far as we know."

We went down the path and found Swede sitting beside a big tree. "Miss Hankin is down there," he said, "where she can watch the front door and the other side. Every now and then she fires a shot just to let him know we're here."

"Tell her to hold her fire, we're coming down," said one of the police.

"Miss Hankin! Don't shoot any more," Swede called. "The police are here."

"All right, Stephen," she replied in her thin high voice.

We all went on down, to find Miss Hankin sitting unconcernedly on a big rock, her rifle across her knees. "I've been firing into the hill," she said. "However, if you'd like I could fire through that window there. The bullet would probably go out through the storeroom roof. He might be willing to listen to reason after two or three shots."

"I think we can make him listen to reason without shooting holes in your roof," said one of the police with a smile. "I'd suggest you three get back where you have some cover while we go inside. I don't expect any shooting, but you can't tell."

While we were waiting for the police I suddenly thought of the book. "Swede, the book!" I said. "Where is it?"

"I gave it to Miss Hankin, and was I glad to get rid of it!" he said. "I forgot all about it until I started to sit down after you left. It was in my hip pocket. I guess I put it there while we were hiding in the closet."

We heard a few shouts, and a few minutes later the police came out the front door of the mill, leading a man in khaki trousers, a faded blue shirt, and a khaki jacket. He was wearing one of those shapeless hats that fishermen wear. Over his shoulder was a creel, and he was carrying a rod and reel.

"This is an outrage," he said. "I might have been killed by these lunatics."

"We'll straighten things out in a minute," said one of the policemen. "No one has been hurt. Possibly there's a mistake and possibly not."

He motioned for us to come nearer. As we did so the man removed his floppy hat. His hair was an iron gray, he was deeply tanned, he had no mustache, and he was wearing horn-rimmed spectacles. When Swede and I saw him clearly we stopped and stared. Then we looked blankly at each other.

"Now what is this nonsense?" demanded the man. "What sort of joke are you two boys pulling? Whatever it is, I assure you I don't appreciate it."

We walked closer, feeling like fools. We were so dumfounded at seeing a stranger that we both wanted to turn and run into the woods. We probably would have made some sort of an apology if the man hadn't been so nasty.

"It's a fine state of affairs when a man can't enjoy a day in the woods without being locked in a dark room by two hoodlums and fired upon by some crazy old woman," he said.

"I halfway wish I had fired through the window," said Miss Hankin mildly. "And these two boys are not hoodlums. There's a very good reason for their acting as they did. Naturally they'd be suspicious."

"Maybe he's some friend of Flip's," said Swede. "He went straight to the storeroom where the book was hidden."

"I have no idea what you two are talking about," said the man. He turned to the officer who held his arm. "If you will kindly let go of my arm, I think I'd like to leave. This area is apparently inhabited by suspicious madmen."

By this time we were very close to him. Something about his voice sounded familiar, and also his eyes were like Flip's. "He looks like Flip DeVoe," I said. "Maybe he's an older brother."

"Perhaps the best place to settle all this is at headquarters," said the officer in charge.

"I'll sue you for false arrest if you keep on with this," said the man. "This will cost you your jobs."

Threatening the police was apparently the worst thing he could have done, because that settled the question. We all walked back up to Burnt Hill and got into the police car. Miss Hankin and Swede and I sat in the back seat and the other three in front. We had to leave our bicycles behind.

Although we were unable to prove it immediately, the man turned out to be Flip DeVoe. At the police barracks they examined him and found that the deep tan was caused by make-up and that his hair was dyed.

"I imagine he learned a good deal about make-up while he was in the circus," said Lieutenant Hubbard, who was at the station when we arrived. "A clever make-up man can work wonders. As long as no one comes too close, a man can even get by with a false nose. I suppose he felt confident enough in his disguise to think that the best method was to go back to the mill during the day. Then if he found anyone watching the area he could have posed as a passing fisherman. We'll have a report on his fingerprints by tomorrow, and then he won't be able to deny his identity."

Miss Hankin came to our house for dinner and for the night. After dinner Mrs. Larson and Swede came over. Naturally all the conversation was about the capture.

"The combination of Burnt Hill and these two boys seems to cause excitement and trouble," Mother said. "I would think you'd be relieved if they would stay away for a

while, Miss Hankin. I know I'm not going to be able to relax for the rest of the summer if Neil is outside the yard."

"I've enjoyed every minute of it," said Miss Hankin. "Of course, I'm sorry about poor Mr. Auerbach. But I've enjoyed seeing the boys. I still can't quite believe that all the furor was about that little book."

"Let's call Mr. McVaugh and see if he knows how much it's worth," I said. "We still don't know if it's really valuable or not."

"It's almost ten o'clock," said Mother. "Mr. McVaugh goes to bed early, and if you get him out of bed he'll bite your head off."

He was grumpy when I called, but when I told him about the almanacs and the inscriptions he changed immediately.

"I'll be right over," he said. "As soon as I can get my pants on."

Mr. McVaugh scarcely said hello when he arrived but asked for the book immediately. He sat down in a chair and opened the cover tenderly. Making happy clucking noises to himself, he turned the pages one by one. Now and then he would sigh and say, "lovely, lovely," in a gloating voice.

He wasn't at all interested in the story about Flip DeVoe's capture. In fact he didn't half listen.

"The important thing is that the book is undamaged," he said, stroking the cover as though it were velvet. "This Flip DeVoe should be punished severely. Chasing around

through the woods and climbing among the rafters with something valuable like this! It's probably sheer accident he didn't tear it apart or damage it in some way."

"Of course there's the minor little matter of Mr. DeVoe having caused a man's death," said Miss Hankin with a dry smile.

"Ah, yes, there's that too," admitted Mr. McVaugh. "I'd suggest you lock this up in a vault where it will be safe until you dispose of it."

"What's it worth?" I asked. I knew that Miss Hankin was too polite to ask, but she undoubtedly wanted to know.

"That's rather difficult to say," he said slowly. "It all depends on who wants it for their collection. This is in wonderful shape and should be quite a prize. I'd guess that if you put it up at auction in New York it might bring anywhere between five and ten thousand dollars."

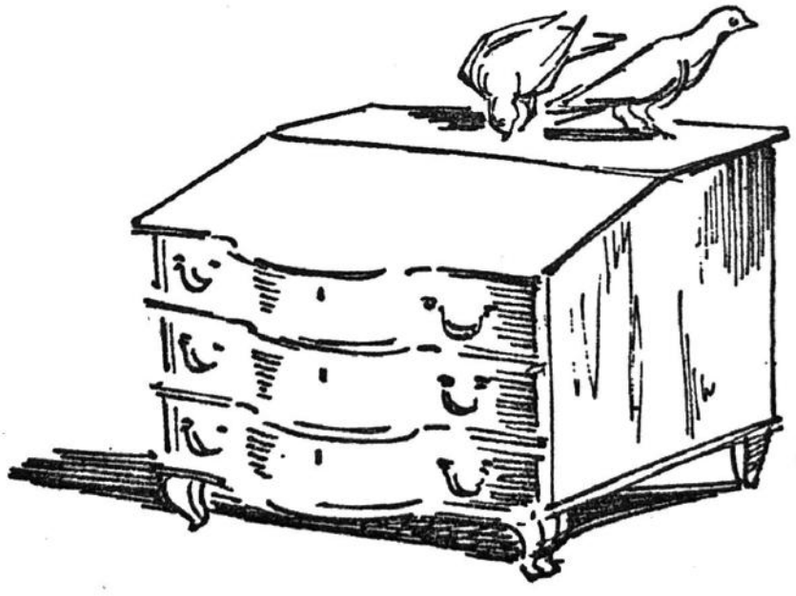
Miss Hankin gave a slight gasp. She looked at Swede and me and smiled. "Burnt Hill is going to be a wonderful farm by this fall," she said. "And there are going to be riding horses in the stables again—one for each of you, and they are not going to be plugs either."

My mother didn't know the entire story about Miss Hankin's plans for the farm, but she understood the part about the riding horses. "I think plugs that couldn't possibly go faster than a walk would be more appreciated by me at least," she said. "These two would be chasing rustlers the

first day, if they had a horse that could run. And I won't agree to their going chasing all over the state on horseback even though they take two crates of carrier pigeons along."

Miss Hankin smiled. "We'll have a big barbecue in honor of you two boys. Possibly my grandnephew will be here. Neil, when you write your history paper about life at Burnt Hill I'm afraid you'll have to bring it up to the present. You and Swede are a part of its history now."

I hadn't thought of it before, but what she said was true. History wasn't just something that had happened a long time ago. It was happening now, and we were part of it.



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